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ABSTRACT

Jamaica's Drive to Liberty: The Effects of the 1938 Riots on Jamaica's Journey to Independence

Tameka Figaro

This thesis examines the contribution of the 1938 labor riots to Jamaica's journey to independence. The events of 1938 marked the beginning of a new era for Jamaica, namely the rise of trade unionism and the development of political parties. Both organizations led to the rise of leaders such as Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante who had a profound effect on Jamaica becoming the first independent nation of the British West Indies in 1962. The research took a qualitative approach with the use of primary and secondary sources with a literature review focused on Jamaica's ideological shift, the 1938 riots, and the political efforts of Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante.

Keywords: Independence, Jamaica, 1938 Labor Riots, Alexander Bustamante, Norman Manley.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Jamaica is one of Britain's oldest colonies, officially colonized in 1707, and the first to gain independence in the British West Indies on August 6, 1962. This thesis argues that the 1938 labour riots contributed significantly to Jamaica's movement toward independence. The events of May to June 1938 marked the beginning of a new era for Jamaica. It led to the rise of trade unionism, the emergence of political organisation, and gave Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante a platform that propelled their political efforts to negotiate independence for Jamaica. The purpose of this study is to analyze the causes of the 1938 riots and examine its effects on Jamaica becoming independent. The objectives are to investigate factors that contributed to Jamaica's independence to determine the extent to which Jamaica's 1938 labour riots were significant to Jamaica's journey to independence.

Rationale

This topic was chosen because as I was investigating it, I realized there was not a substantial amount of research on the connection of the 1938 riots to Jamaica's independence in 1962. The connection between the two sparked my curiosity to add to the literature with this particular angle in mind. I was also interested in Jamaica's independence, as the island was the first to gain its independence from the British Crown in the region. For this reason, I wanted to investigate the catalysts for Jamaica's independence.

Significance

This research is important as it would add to the literature on Jamaica's journey to independence and the significance of the 1938 riots in the process of decolonization in Jamaica.

The thesis would be an asset to persons interested in Caribbean History, the history of Jamaica, Political Science, and the British Empire.

Methodology

The parameters of this research are between 1938 and 1962, spanning the year of the riots to the year Jamaica gained its independence. The discussion is limited to Jamaica, but some references are made to the British West Indies to contextualize what was taking place in Jamaica. To achieve this, a qualitative research method was employed. Primary sources such as newspaper articles from the *Daily Gleaner*, the *Trinidad Guardian*, in addition to the *Report of the West India Royal Commission*, were used. These primary sources allowed for an in-depth understanding of the nature of the riots, their causes, and subsequent effects. Additionally, secondary sources namely books, journals, and dissertations also were used to collect data.

This study fell within the genre of political and social history and was guided largely by a hypothetical approach. The researcher reckoned that of the factors which led to Jamaica's independence, the 1938 labour riots had a significant impact. Subsequently, this study sought to investigate this hypothesis. There were some limitations in acquiring primary sources locally as the research topic was specific to Jamaica. However, to rectify this, articles from the *Trinidad Guardian* were utilized instead of the *Daily Gleaner*.

Brief Background of Jamaica and 1930s riots in the Caribbean

In 1655, Jamaica became a British colony that produced sugar through enslaved African labor. The enslaved were emancipated in 1838 but this did not substantially change their circumstances. "The society then was comprised of two communities living cheek by jowl; one

white, rich and small in number; the other black, poor and numerous.”¹ In the post-emancipation era, Jamaica experienced an “economic depression, worsened by a succession of floods and droughts on provision ground.”² The Jamaican masses also lacked political representation. “Although emancipation had conferred civil rights on all ex-slaves, political rights accrued only those who possessed property to the value required by the laws then in force.”³ It was within this context that the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion erupted. The British government responded by instituting a series of reforms, including the abolition of the old Jamaican Assembly and the creation of a Crown Colony System of government to “provide impartial government and protect the interests of the poor and ignorant.”⁴

However, the grievances of the poor and disenfranchised were left unaddressed. “Jamaica’s constitution was structured to protect and advance the interests of the colonial state and the privileged members of society...”⁵ Subsequently, the issues which initially sparked the Morant Bay Rebellion continued into the 1930s. This period was characterized by a global economic depression, the decline of sugar, high unemployment, an increase in the cost of living, poverty, and unsustainable living and working conditions. “The 1930s in the Caribbean saw the unfolding of a crisis...”⁶ and labor riots erupted across the West Indies.

In 1935 there were spontaneous and unorganized labor uprisings in St. Kitts as laborers demanded “a wage increase.”⁷ Similarly, in that year, riots broke out in St. Vincent in response to rising retail prices, as well as “static and extremely low wages.”⁸ By 1937 there was rioting

¹ Roy Augier, “Before and After 1865,” in *Caribbean Freedom*, ed. Verene Shepherd et al., (Ian Randle Publishers, 2016), 171.

² Augier, “Before and After 1865,” 174.

³ Augier, “Before and After 1865,” 171.

⁴ Augier, “Before and After 1865,” 180.

⁵ Colin Palmer, “Jamaica in 1938,” *Freedom’s Children: The 1938 Labour Rebellion and the Birth of Modern Jamaica* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 10.

⁶ Cary Fraser, “The Twilight of Colonial Rule in the British West Indies: Nationalist Assertion vs. Imperial Hubris in the 1930s,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* (1996): 1.

⁷ Hart, “The Labour Rebellions of the 1930s,” 370.

⁸ Hart, “The Labour Rebellions of the 1930s,” 371.

in Barbados in response to poor socio-economic conditions and the unfair treatment of trade union leader Clement Payne at the hands of the colonial authorities. In that same year, Trinidad oil workers went on strike demanding higher wages and better working conditions and rioting erupted with the arrest of Uriah “Buzz” Butler. One year later, Jamaica had a series of sporadic riots and strikes throughout the island from May to June 1938.

Ultimately, the 1938 labor riots in Jamaica were part of a wider problem of social, economic, and political crises in the British Caribbean which culminated in riots across the British West Indies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature is organized according to themes of Jamaica's ideological shift, the 1938 riots, and the political efforts of Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante.

Jamaica's Ideological Shift

Jamaica's early twentieth-century ideological shift refers to a transition from a colonial mindset and dependence on the British Crown, to one rooted in black pride and Jamaican nationalism. Before this transition, Tim Birte notes that both the colonizers and Jamaicans believed that Jamaica was incapable of self-governance (2016, 5).⁹ According to Charlotte Richard, this internalized belief of incompetence and reverence for the British Crown complicated Jamaica's development of national identity and subsequently delayed the demand for independence (2017, 61).¹⁰

Scholars note that an ideological shift was necessary for Jamaicans to reject British colonialism and inspire a desire for self-governance. Barry Chevannes in *Betwixt and Between: Explorations in an African Caribbean Mindscape*, asserts that Jamaica's ideological transition not only criticized British hegemony, but it was also the only way to formulate a Jamaican cultural and social hegemony (2006, 11).¹¹ Chevannes notes that Marcus Garvey, as well as writers such as Victor Reid and Roger Mais, and the Rastafarian movement primarily aimed to propagate black pride, and Jamaican nationalism, and explicitly reject British colonialism

⁹ Tim Birte, *Nationalists Abroad*, (Ian Randle Publishers, 2016), 5.

¹⁰ Charlotte H. Richard, "Emancipate Ourselves from Mental Slavery: Gibraltar Camp, Black Nationalism, Economics, and Jamaica's Independence Movement," (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 2017), 61.

¹¹ Barry Chevannes, *Betwixt and Between: Explorations in an African Caribbean Mindscape*, (Ian Randle Publishers, 2006), 11.

(2006, 12).¹² Simboonath Singh (2004, 29),¹³ agrees with Chevannes when he posits that the Rastafarian movement challenged the negative European hegemonic depiction and images of blackness and counteracted it with an embrasure of pride in blackness. Singh also claims that the Rastafarian movement was particularly influential in raising anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist consciousness amongst Jamaicans.

Roger Mais and Victor Reid contest Jamaica's oppressive colonial state and sought to redefine blackness in their writings. Mais opposed British colonialism in *Brother Man* and reiterates nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments in *The Leopard*. Critics are of the view that his work is the earliest statement of discovery of a West Indian consciousness. The work of Chevannes, Reid and Mais is useful to this study as they show the relevance of the ideology of rejecting British colonialism. For this reason, Kevin Meehan and Paul Miller argue that the significance of Jamaica's early twentieth-century ideological shift as a catalyst for the colony's independence cannot be overstated (2009, 353).¹⁴

However, it may be suggested that these scholars exaggerate the importance of an ideological shift in Jamaica's movement toward independence and fail to recognize how other factors such as the 1938 riots also contributed to the colony's movement toward independence. Secondly, these scholarly contributions do not clearly state how the twentieth-century ideological shift influenced Jamaica's independence; instead, more emphasis was placed on the transformation from a colonial to a nationalist ideology.

¹² Chevannes, *Betwixt and Between: Explorations in an African Caribbean Mindscape*, 12.

¹³ Simboonath Singh, "Resistance, Essentialism, and Empowerment in Black Nationalist Discourse in the African Diaspora: A Comparison of the Back to Africa, Black Power, and Rastafari Movements" *Journal of African American Studies* (2004): 29.

¹⁴ Kevin Meehan and Paul B. Miller, "Literature and Popular Culture," *Understanding the Contemporary Caribbean* (Ian Randle Publishers, 2009), 353.

The 1938 Riots

Paul Buhle, Charlotte Richard, and Gordon Lewis assert that the 1938 riots were the foundation of Jamaica's journey to independence. Buhle (2006, 77)¹⁵ claims that the 1938 riots gave rise to instrumental political leaders and sparked political and class consciousness amongst the masses. Richard agrees with Buhle when he states that the 1938 riots were a turning point and became a catalyst of Jamaica's independence movement. Similarly, Singh (2004, 178)¹⁶ concurs that the period of the 1938 riots was a gestatory period of the twin forces of class awareness and nationalism.

They agree that the riots demonstrate that the Jamaican populace had become conscious of their deteriorating economic and social conditions and in response mobilized and demanded political intervention. The populace was not only able to identify the cause of their social and economic conditions which were a result of class inequality rooted in colorism and racism, but Jamaicans were able to direct their frustration at the British colonial government. This indicated their political and class consciousness which was particularly necessary for independence.

While these arguments exist, there is a lack of literature that delves into the importance of the 1938 riots as a catalyst for Jamaica's independence. Most sources are concerned with the immediate causes and consequences of the riots, and not necessarily its role in Jamaica's journey to independence. For example, Maurice St. Pierre's "The 1938 Jamaica Disturbances: A Portrait of Mass Reaction Against Colonialism" (1978),¹⁷ and K. W. J. Post's "The Politics of Protest in Jamaica, 1938: Some Problems of Analysis and Conceptualization" (1969),¹⁸ offer a comprehensive analysis of the nature, causes, and consequences of the 1938 labour riots,

¹⁵ Paul Buhle, *Tim Hector: A Caribbean Radical's Story* (University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 77.

¹⁶ Singh, "Resistance, Essentialism, and Empowerment in Black Nationalist Discourse in the African Diaspora: A Comparison of the Back to Africa, Black Power, and Rastafari Movements," 178.

¹⁷ Maurice St. Pierre, "The 1939 Jamaica Disturbances: A Portrait of Mass Reaction Against Colonialism," *Social and Economic Studies* (1978): 171-196.

¹⁸ K. W. J. Post, "The Politics of Protest in Jamaica, 1938: Some Problems of Analysis and Conceptualization," *Social and Economic Studies* (1969): 374-390.

however, no correlation was made between the riots and Jamaica's independence. As such, to fill this gap, this thesis seeks to examine the contributions of the 1938 riots and its connection to Jamaica becoming independent.

Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante

Colin Palmer and Tim Birte assert that political leaders Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante played an important role in Jamaica's independence. Palmer (2016, 95)¹⁹ acknowledges that these political leaders contributed significantly to the construction of Jamaica's constitutional future and journey to self-governance. Birte (2016, 15)²⁰ also posits that Bustamante and Manley played central roles in what can be regarded as the major attempt in the colonial period to secure Jamaica's independence. Manley was admittedly devoted to the goal of attaining self-governance for Jamaica. He relentlessly petitioned for constitutional change and demanded political autonomy. As a result of his efforts, Palmer posits that Jamaica attained constitutional change incrementally, eventually leading to self-governance. Furthermore, although Bustamante was slow and indecisive in his support of an independent Jamaica, by 1957, he joined Manley in his advocacy for independence.

Richard (2017, 83)²¹ however challenges Birte and Palmer claiming that although the two political leaders were important, they were especially stagnant in their stance concerning an independent Jamaica. According to her, Manley was initially against an independent Jamaica and only advocated for universal adult suffrage while Bustamante was vocal in his disapproval of an independent Jamaica until 1957. For her, their slow acceptance of an independent Jamaica delayed Jamaica's progress toward independence.

¹⁹ Colin Palmer, *Inward Yearnings: Jamaica's Journey to Nationhood* (The University of the West Indies Press, 2016), 95.

²⁰ Birte, *Nationalists Abroad*, (Ian Randle Publishers, 2016), 15.

²¹ Richard, "Emancipate Ourselves from Mental Slavery: Gibraltar Camp, Black Nationalism, Economics, and Jamaica's Independence Movement," 83.

Organization of Thesis

This research is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, which consists of the methodology, literature review, objectives, rationale, significance, and background of this study. The second chapter examines the causes of the 1938 riots in Jamaica. Chapter three provides a discussion of the events of the riots. The fourth chapter assesses the consequences of the riots and the recommendations of the Moyne Commission, the rise of trade unionism, and political developments. The last chapter highlights the fall of the British Empire, the collapse of the West Indies Federation, and the Jamaican Referendum and the 1938 riots, as contributors to Jamaica's journey toward independence.

Summary

This chapter introduced literature on Jamaica's ideology shift, the 1938 riots and notable political leaders. Additionally, the chapter stated the purpose, rationale, and importance of this study and provided background in Jamaica and the 1930s riots in the Caribbean. The following chapter will examine the causes of the 1938 riots.

CHAPTER TWO

Causes of the 1938 Labor Riots

The labour riots of 1938 were a result of increasing tensions and frustrations over the social and economic conditions in the colony. This chapter examines the underlying socio-economic causes namely a stratified society based on race, class and colour; high unemployment and underemployment; low wages and poverty.

Social Factors

By the 1930s, Jamaica was a demographically diverse colony home to several races and ethnic groups. This was a result of Spanish and British colonial rule, African enslavement, and Chinese and Indian indentureship respectively. “Race...was deeply embedded in the island’s psychology and cultural DNA.”²² At the top of the social ladder, “the peoples of European descent disproportionately controlled the commanding heights of the economy, although by 1938 the Syrians and the Chinese were beginning to claim a larger share.”²³ The latter typically made up the middle sector, particularly as small business owners.

In contrast, those of African descent were the numerical majority but at the bottom and primarily employed in the agricultural sector. Their income and standard of living were “distressingly low, unemployment and underemployment levels were high, the educational level of the majority was low, and housing and sanitation were inadequate and unhygienic.”²⁴ In fact, “28.1 percent of Black Jamaicans were illiterate, compared with 3.2 percent of Whites.”²⁵

²² Palmer, “Jamaica in 1938,” 7.

²³ Palmer, “Jamaica in 1938,” 15.

²⁴ Richard Hart, “Social and Economic Conditions in 1942-1943,” in *Towards Decolonization: Political, Labour, and Economic in Jamaica 1938-1945*, ed. Richard Hart (Jamaica: Canoe Press University of the West Indies, 1999), 189.

²⁵ Palmer, “Jamaica in 1938,” 14.

Moreover, the living conditions, particularly those in the rural areas, were deplorable. The majority of houses were made up of rusty corrugated iron and unsound boarding; rotten flooring; leaking roofs, sanitation in any form was lacking, and the water supply in many instances was unknown²⁶ (See Appendix A). There was overcrowding, and the only available source of water supply was cut off for long periods. In the urban areas, government housing schemes were described as slums, condemned buildings unfit for habitation, and no better than those in the rural areas.

Women, particularly black women, were further disenfranchised and consequently had limited job opportunities. Skin colour also contributed to the discrimination black women faced. “Some employers preferred to have brown or light-skinned women in their employ.”²⁷ The hiring practice based on complexion was so frequent that the “hiring of a black-skinned woman in a job that served the public was an extraordinary event.”²⁸ Black women were also limited to domestic work as housekeepers, waitresses, lodging housekeepers, cooks, and midwives. In 1921, women accounted for 16.9% of the service sector. Women in urban parishes such as St. Andrew and Kingston made up 28.6% of the sector compared to men who comprised 18.0%. Women were underpaid for their labour and often earned 1-4 shillings a day as domestic workers. Therefore, social conditions in the colony as it relates to race, class, colour, and sex, clearly affected employment opportunities and contributed to the rising tensions in the 1930s in Jamaica.

²⁶ Benn, *The Report of West India Royal Commission: With an Introduction*, 174.

²⁷ Palmer, “Race and Colonial Imagination” 80.

²⁸ Palmer, “Race and Colonial Imagination” 80.

Economic Factors

“Poverty was widespread in the 1930s for the majority of the population. Unemployment was high, there was considerable underemployment and seasonal employment. Housing was inadequate. Wages were low.”²⁹ Jamaica’s economy and unemployment issue was further exacerbated by the 1929 Great Depression, as well as the return of Jamaicans from the Panama Canal and World War I, which led to greater competition for work. In 1934, Bustamante observed that “there were too many barefooted, half-naked, and hungry people around.”³⁰ In 1935, statistical data indicated that 92% of those who were employed earned less than 25 shillings per week, and of that figure, 71% received an average of 14 shillings per week.

Low wages were further exacerbated by the rise in the cost of living. When the price of sugar, Jamaica’s main export fell to unremunerative levels by the 1920s, it affected the cost of living. There was a reported “increase of 45% in food, 100% in clothing...and more than 100% in furniture, household linens, and similar furnishings.”³¹ Between 1937 and 1938 local food showed the largest increase.³² For example, in 1937, yam was 1½ dollars per lb, which increased to 2 dollars per lb.

“Unemployment was bad, bad, bad. Everything was tight...”³³ Some people journeyed barefooted from the hills down to the plains where the estates were to simply seek work. “Large numbers of the unemployed marched to the headquarters of the Public Works Department on several occasions and even to one of the prisons, in the hope that the Superintendent would be able to provide them with work.”³⁴ Further, statistical data from an Annual Report of the Labor Department disclosed that from a sample size of 1,009 adults, 16% were unemployed, and

²⁹ Hart, “As It Was In The 1930s,” 5.

³⁰ Palmer, “The Labour Rebellion,” 28.

³¹ Orme W. Phelps, “Rise of the Labour Movement in Jamaica,” *Social and Economic Studies* (1960): 421.

³² Maurice St. Pierre, “The 1939 Jamaica Disturbances: A Portrait of Mass Reaction Against Colonialism,” *Social and Economic Studies* (1978): 173.

³³ Palmer, “Jamaica in 1938,” 20.

³⁴ Denis Benn, *The Report of West India Royal Commission: With an Introduction* (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2011), 195.

31.93% had no gainful occupation. The economic problems of the 1930s contributed to the rising tensions in Jamaica. The labor riots “can only be regarded as a symptom of which the principal causes (were) low earnings and irregular employment.³⁵”

Summary

The labor riots of 1938 were a result of increasing tensions and frustrations over social and economic issues. Jamaica was markedly stratified, and issues of unemployment, and low wages, were further exacerbated by the rise in the cost of living. The following chapter examines the events of May to June 1938.

³⁵ Benn, *The Report of West India Royal Commission: With an Introduction*, 197.

CHAPTER THREE

The Events of 1938

This chapter outlines the chain of events and the catalyst that sparked the riots of 1938 in Jamaica. “The trouble began with a general strike on the waterfront on the 21st, followed by a general strike of street cleaners on the 23rd, and immediately by an upheaval which spread rapidly throughout the island.”³⁶ On April 29, construction workers on the sugar estate at Frome in Westmoreland gathered at the pay office to receive their wages for the week’s work. However, after many hours of waiting, the workers noted that there was a reduction in their rate of pay with no meaningful explanation. “Many men armed with machetes, stones, and fat clubs battered the Pay Office Men and swore that they would not leave until they get all of their money. The police soon appeared on the scene, and order was restored.”³⁷

Following this event, there were soon talks between the workers about staging a strike. On May 2, what was intended to be a strike, quickly erupted into a violent riot. The number of strikers had swelled to 1,000 and then to 3,000 (See Appendix B). The workers rallying cry became “A dollar a day. There is no maybe about it, we will have to get a dollar a day!”³⁸ The *Daily Gleaner* reported on this widespread violence. “The Frome dispute was not a peaceful work stoppage. A mob armed with the standard equipment of sticks and cutlasses stopped traffic, set cane fields on fire, charged the general offices, and attacked company officials.”³⁹ While quelling the protest, the police killed four persons including a pregnant woman, injured seventeen, and arrested 100 persons. Police reinforcement was sent to patrol the estate property at Frome and disperse rioters. Subsequently, the rebellion ceased, and Frome returned to an uneasy calm.

³⁶ Lewis, “The 1930s Labour Revolution,” 384.

³⁷ Palmer, “The Labour Rebellion” 37.

³⁸ Palmer, “The Labour Rebellion” 37.

³⁹ Phelps, “Rise of the Labour Movement in Jamaica,” 423.

The unrest quickly shifted to the capital, Kingston. On May 9, there was an orderly march of about 200 persons to the site of the Headquarters House, the executive office of the colonial government, and Corporation offices to demand jobs. By May 13, disappointed by baseless promises of work, thousands of unemployed persons trampled the city looking for work. As days passed, tensions rose and so did the number of demonstrators. Approximately 2,000 unemployed people gathered at Trench Pen, on the outskirts of Kingston, and physically forced laborers who worked on a public project quit their work⁴⁰ (See Appendix C).

In Kingston, the unrest moved from Trench Pen to the waterfront. Dock labourers of the United Fruit Company demanded a raise in pay to no avail. As such, the laborers decided to stage a strike and diverted the cargo ships to unload on the northeast coast of the island instead of the waterfront in Kingston. They refused to handle the ship unless they received a wage increase, but the Company did not comply.

“During the same period, a series of meetings were held in and around Kingston at which speeches of an inflammatory nature were delivered. The principal speakers at these meetings were Alexander Bustamante and William Grant.”⁴¹ Grant was also a labor leader. Bustamante was a trade unionist who sought to alleviate the plight of the workers, he often negotiated with employers on behalf of workers and held public meetings to encourage or quell the crowds. He was “formerly a member of the Jamaica Workers' and Tradesmen's Union but left it in 1937 and the early months of 1938 conducted a campaign of meetings throughout the island, especially in Kingston.”⁴² Following what occurred in Trench Penn and at the waterfront, Bustamante was called upon to restore peace among the crowd and he did so but to no avail.⁴³

On May 23 rioting ensued. Public property was destroyed, streets were blocked, and the rioters took possession of the Gold Street Power Station of the Jamaica Public Service

⁴⁰ “Angry Unemployed Again Stop Work At Trench Penn,” *The Daily Gleaner*, May 18, 1938.

⁴¹ Lewis, “The 1930s Social Revolution,” 384.

⁴² Lewis, “The 1930s Social Revolution,” 384.

⁴³ “Angry Unemployed Again Stop Work at Trench Penn,” *The Daily Gleaner*, May 18, 1938.

Company. The workers refused to disperse upon the instructions of the police and, the Riot Act was read. The rioters were removed by a baton charge undertaken by the police.⁴⁴ Rioting continued into May 24. Chinese shops and crops were set ablaze, crowds began to gather at the capital, and police reinforcement attempted to disband the crowd throughout the day. There were official reports stating that the crowd began to stone the police and as a result, the police fired twelve rounds of bullets allegedly toward the ground “which killed a woman and her nine-year-old son and injured three persons.”⁴⁵

As the unrest heightened, Bustamante and Grant sought to calm the crowd by holding a meeting without police permission and they were arrested on May 24 (See Appendix D). “Bustamante was charged with inciting people to assemble unlawfully and with sedition. Grant was charged with sedition, with inciting people to assemble unlawfully.”⁴⁶ Following this, Norman Manley “offered his services as a mediator between capital and labor.”⁴⁷

Manley, unlike Bustamante, had no prior identification with the labor cause. He was a prominent barrister, who happened to be the cousin of Bustamante and was closely related to the middle class. “But in those tumultuous days in May 1938, Manley emerged as a voice of caution, sanity, and reason.”⁴⁸ Manley proposed the formation of a Labor Committee that would “represent the different groups of workers and negotiate on their behalf as well as propose and advocate a programme for the general improvement of labour conditions.”⁴⁹ His efforts played a significant part in the negotiations and settlements of labor grievances.

On May 31, *The Daily Gleaner* characterized Jamaica as the “land of strikes.” There were strikes on almost all banana plantations in the rural villages of St. Thomas, Portland, St.

⁴⁴ Richard Hart, “Rise and Organise: The Birth of the Workers and National Movements in Jamaica (1936-1939),” (Karia Press, 1989), 51.

⁴⁵ “Rioting Again in Jamaica,” *Trinidad Guardian*, June 4, 1938.

⁴⁶ Palmer, “The Labour Rebellion” 51.

⁴⁷ Palmer, “The Labour Rebellion” 52.

⁴⁸ Palmer, “The Labour Rebellion” 52-53.

⁴⁹ Palmer, “The Labour Rebellion” 55.

Mary, and St. Catherine. “All classes of workers struck, and telegraph services were crippled in the parishes.”⁵⁰ A series of protests occurred between May 28 and June 10 in rural areas (See Appendix E). In Clarendon, “strikers blocked roads, cut telephone wires, and looted shops, particularly those belonging to the Chinese.”⁵¹ By May 30, the labourers of practically all of the banana-growing estates in St. Mary went on strike. In Portland, shops were looted, and trucks carrying bananas to be loaded for export at Port Antonio were turned back. In all of the aforementioned cases, armed police officers, constables, and soldiers often resorted to force to disperse the crowds. In one instance, there was a clash between the police and demonstrators in Clarendon in which one of the demonstrators was fatally wounded. The riots of 1938 concluded with “8 persons killed, 171 wounded, and over 700 arrested and prosecuted.”⁵²

Summary

The labor riots of May to June 1938 can be summarized as a mass response to the poor socio-economic conditions of the colony. What started at Frome Estate as an impassioned dissatisfaction with the reduction of wages, quickly evolved into rioting across the island for nearly two months.

⁵⁰ Palmer, “The Labour Rebellion” 57.

⁵¹ Palmer, “The Labour Rebellion” 57.

⁵² Lewis, “The 1930s Social Revolution,” 385.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Consequences of the 1938 Riots

This chapter focuses on the recommendations of the Moyne Commission, the rise of trade unionism, and the emergence of political organization in the colony which occurred as a result of the 1938 riots and consequently contributed to Jamaica attaining its independence.

Moyne Commission

The West Indian Moyne Commission, named after its chairman, Lord Moyne, was appointed by the British government in 1938 to investigate the reasons for the riots and identify measures to improve the conditions in the region (See Appendix F). The Commission conducted extensive research and interviewed local officials, politicians, and ordinary citizens across the colonies. “The Moyne Commission made some bold proposals to address the social and economic conditions in the colonies.”⁵³ One of the main recommendations of the Commission was an annual grant of £1,000,000 for twenty years through the West Indian Welfare Fund “to finance improvements in housing, health services, education, and slum clearance.”⁵⁴ It was also recommended that “powers should be taken to the siting of new housing...with regard to considerations of health, sanitation, and water supply. For urban housing, powers should be taken to...condemn and clear bad slum housing.”⁵⁵ Further, the Commission maintained that “financial assistance to the colonies was justified in moments other than those of crises.”⁵⁶

The Moyne Report of 1940 recommended the “enactment of laws to protect Unions from actions for damages consequent on strikes, the legalization of peaceful picketing, the

⁵³ Palmer, “Looking Back, Moving Forward,” 113.

⁵⁴ *West India Royal Commission Report* (London: His Majesty Stationary Office, 1945), 431.

⁵⁵ *West India Royal Commission Report*, 436-7.

⁵⁶ Palmer, “Looking Back, Moving Forward,” 113.

compulsory registration of Trade Unions and audit of their funds... [so that] Trade Unions develop to the point at which they can play a decisive role in the regulation of wages and conditions of employment.⁵⁷” The Commission recognized that there were no official organizations to supervise labor matters or the enforcement of industrial legislation. As such, it was seen as necessary to develop and protect trade unions in the colonies to address labor matters such as wage rates, working hours, and working conditions.

The Rise of Trade Unionism

In Jamaica, from the riots of 1938, two things arose, “the rise of trade unions, and the entry of the working classes into West Indian politics.”⁵⁸ Previously, “Jamaican workers lacked any protection from their employers in the aftermath of slavery, having neither unions nor guilds.”⁵⁹ There were “only two [trade unions] ... of any significant size, the Jamaica Workers' and Tradesmen's Union and the Jamaica United Clerks' Association.”⁶⁰

“The riots led directly to the formation of many unions, a quickening of interests in unionism, and a colonial policy of positive encouragement to union development.”⁶¹ In 1919, the Trade Union Law allowed trade unions to register unions and conduct their affairs. However, one of the key issues with this law was the fact that it “did not legalize picketing nor protect strikers from legal action by disgruntled employers.”⁶² This was revised in 1939 to allow for peaceful picketing; it removed liability, and prohibited tort action against trade unions.

Bustamante became the architect of modern-day trade unionism in Jamaica. Bustamante left the JWTU and founded the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union in July 1938

⁵⁷ *West India Royal Commission Report*, 438.

⁵⁸ Lewis, “The 1930s Social Revolution,” 386.

⁵⁹ Palmer, “Bustamante, Unionism, and the Politics of Performance,” 115.

⁶⁰ Lewis, “The 1930s Social Revolution,” 384.

⁶¹ William H. Knowles, “Trade Unionism in the British West Indies,” (*Monthly Labour Review*, 1956); 1394.

⁶² Palmer, “Bustamante and the Politics of Performance,” 116.

which claimed a membership of approximately 50,000. It was the largest union in the colony which “embraced labourers from all sects of society.”⁶³ In addition, there were other trade unions that developed subsequent to the riots, though they were relatively small, such as the Jamaica Government Railways Employees Union, the Water Commission Workers’ Union, the Jamaica United Workers Union, and the Tramways Transport & General Workers Union, with membership ranging from 200 to 1,000 labourers.

Ultimately, the rise of trade unions and memberships from all classes of the working population, in an effort to negotiate better working conditions, showed that Jamaican workers were “no longer willing to humbly accept poverty and chronic unemployment.”⁶⁴

The Emergence of Political Organisation

“Although the Crown Colony administration was at the time an improvement compared with the old plantocracy, sooner or later, the limitations of this form of government became obvious. Beneath the surface, resistance was brewing against the paternalistic type of government.”⁶⁵ However, there was no urgency to politically organize and advocate for constitutional reform or address the conditions of the colony, nevertheless, the 1938 riots “dramatized the need for such a development”⁶⁶ and sparked a sense of earnestness for political organization. As a result, “a ... political and reform movement began to grow parallel to the growth in trade union activity.”⁶⁷

In May 1938, amid the riots, Manley, at a press conference, announced that he would “form and lead a political party that would...guide the development of Jamaica into a self-

⁶³ Palmer, “Bustamante and the Politics of Performance,” 168.

⁶⁴ Knowles, “Trade Unionism in the British West Indies,” 1349.

⁶⁵ Bayer, “Trade Unions and Political Parties,” 19.

⁶⁶ Nettleford, “Manley and the Politics of Jamaica: Toward an Analysis of Political Change in Jamaica 1938-1968,” 1.

⁶⁷ David Panton, “The Development of Political Tradition,” *Jamaica’s Michael Manley: The Great Transformation (1972-92)*, (LMH Publishing Limited, 1993); 22.

governing nation.”⁶⁸ On September 18, 1938, the People’s National Party (PNP) was created, with Manley as its leader.⁶⁹ For Manley and the PNP, “self-governance was the first and foremost principle of political organisation.”⁷⁰ The PNP insisted on autonomy and avowed to establish a responsible government in Jamaica.

Bustamante was initially part of the PNP but “did not support the party’s primary objective of self-government.”⁷¹ Additionally, the “declaration of the PNP as a socialist party further estranged Bustamante from the political party.”⁷² As a result, in 1942, Bustamante departed from the PNP and formed the JLP in 1943, which emerged as a liberal capitalist party that focused on “labour legislation and social welfare reform.”⁷³ Moreover, several other political parties were formed after the 1938 riots namely “the Jamaica Liberal Party, the Jamaica Radical Worker’s Party, and the Jamaica Democratic Party.”⁷⁴ However, the JLP and the PNP were “the two primary contenders in the 1944 elections.”⁷⁵

The JLP won the general elections in 1944 and 1949. The JLP’s mandate was to “guide the Jamaican people as a whole along the road to political maturity and lead the wage-earning class to widen economic equality.”⁷⁶ Bustamante’s political efforts included steps to industrial development to accelerate the pace of national economic growth. Furthermore, he introduced the Ministerial System which put substantial power and responsibility in the hands of the elected representatives, devised to deal with the welfare of the populace.

⁶⁸ Nettleford, “Manley and the Politics of Jamaica: Toward an Analysis of Political Change in Jamaica 1938-1968,” 1.

⁶⁹ Nettleford, “Manley and the Politics of Jamaica: Toward an Analysis of Political Change in Jamaica 1938-1968,” 1.

⁷⁰ Nettleford, “Manley and the Politics of Jamaica: Toward an Analysis of Political Change in Jamaica 1938-1968,” 41.

⁷¹ Panton, “The Development of Political Tradition,” 22.

⁷² Panton, “The Development of Political Tradition,” 22.

⁷³ Panton, “The Development of Political Tradition,” 22.

⁷⁴ Panton, “The Development of Political Tradition,” 22.

⁷⁵ Panton, “The Development of Political Tradition,” 22.

⁷⁶ Frank Hill, “Bustamante and His Letters,” (Kingston Publishers Limited, 1976); 43.

The PNP won the 1955 and 1959 elections and implemented several major constitutional changes which placed more power in the hands of the Jamaicans. “These reforms reflected in large part the desire to withdraw from British rule.”⁷⁷ The PNP employed a cabinet government that strengthened the role of local leadership and implemented full-internal self-government where the Chief Minister becomes Premier and assumed responsibility for local affairs.

Essentially, the 1938 riots “brought these two forces – labor and politics – and particularly these two men – Bustamante and Manley – to the fore of the reform cause”⁷⁸ (See Appendix G) (See Appendix H).

Summary

As a result of the 1938 riots, there were significant consequences: the appointment of the Moyne Commission which offered recommendations to remedy the conditions of the colonies; the rise in trade unionism and the emergence of political organizations which addressed the colony’s conditions through advocacy and constitutional reform. The following chapter discusses Jamaica’s path to independence.

⁷⁷ Panton, “The Development of Political Tradition,” 23.

⁷⁸ Panton, “The Development of Political Tradition,” 21.

CHAPTER FIVE

The 1938 Riots and Jamaica's Movement to Independence

Jamaica's journey to independence is quite complex due to the following contributory factors: the political agitations of Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante, the decline of the British Empire, the Jamaican referendum, and the subsequent collapse of the West Indies Federation. Nonetheless, it is argued that the 1938 riots propelled trade unionism, political organisation, and political leadership which were critical to Jamaica becoming a nation in 1962.

The Collapse of the British Empire

The collapse of the British Empire was a key factor in Jamaica becoming independent. During the post-World War II era, Britain was economically depressed.⁷⁹ Subsequently, Britain sold its overseas investments, and many of its capital investments such as industrial machinery were worn out. The reality was that the economic cost of maintaining the infrastructure and administration of its colonies became unsustainable.

In addition, as awareness of the negative effects of colonialism grew within Britain and internationally, it became increasingly difficult for the British government to justify the continuation of colonial rule in Jamaica. "After the War, the United Nations provided a critical forum for anti-colonial pressure."⁸⁰ Further, "the period following World War II witnessed growing nationalism in Jamaica."⁸¹ Momentum increased with the influence of global independence movements, particularly in Southeast Asia and Africa, as well as the growing recognition of the political and social rights of colonized peoples.

⁷⁹ Jeff Wallenfeldt, "Britain Since 1945," The United Kingdom: England (Britannica Educational Publishing, 2013), 328.

⁸⁰ Carl P Watts, "British Decolonisation," *World History Encyclopaedia Era 9: Promises and Paradoxes 1945-Present* (2010): 2, https://www.academia.edu/2002497/British_Decolonization.

⁸¹ Stephen Vasciannie, "Jamaica's Brexit: Remembering the West Indian Federation," *Jamaica Observer*, June 25, 2016.

Meanwhile, the PNP government introduced several major changes to bring home rule to Jamaica. “In 1957, the PNP implemented a cabinet government which strengthened the role of the local leadership in various aspects of the economy.”⁸² In 1959, “the PNP introduced full internal self-government where the Chief Minister became the Premier and assumed the responsibility for local affairs.”⁸³ That year, the PNP also increased the number of elected members from 16 to 29 in the House of Representatives.

The West Indies Federation and the Jamaican Referendum

During the period of decolonization, the British were agreeable to its colonies in the West Indies becoming independent. “The British government had the view that the independence of small and isolated states had to be discouraged. Combining strengths in a federal structure was the only way to create sufficient economic potential and a domestic market of any size.”⁸⁴ Manley eventually shared the same sentiment as the British. He stated that it was “impossible to assume that each island, even the largest, could by itself be in a position to provide the necessities of a modern state.”⁸⁵ The Federation of the West Indies was the means for the West Indies to become independent. It was a political union that existed from January 3, 1958, to May 31, 1962. It consisted of ten territories, including Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados and had a constitution, government, and currency.⁸⁶ It was a “means to an end, to achieve self-government.”⁸⁷

However, the British failed to consider the fact that the Federation lacked economic feasibility. The larger, more populous islands “were able to pay for their own cost of

⁸² Panton, “Independence, Democracy and Social Unrest (1944-1972),” 26.

⁸³ Panton, “Independence, Democracy and Social Unrest (1944-1972),” 26.

⁸⁴ Bayer, “The Federal Experiment,” 21.

⁸⁵ Bayer, “The Federal Experiment,” 21.

⁸⁶ “The West Indies Federation,” CARICOM: Caribbean Community, <https://caricom.org/the-west-indies-federation/>.

⁸⁷ Boxill, “The Evolution of Regionalism in the Caribbean,” 33.

administration, whereas none of the other islands [were] able to consistently do so.”⁸⁸ This placed the economic burden of the Federation on Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago in particular. According to Manley, the Federation “would pressure Jamaica into releasing scarce resources, something which the country could ill afford given the mass poverty which existed.”⁸⁹

Another shortcoming of the Federation was a lack of regionalism. The islands were “more integrated with Britain than among themselves.”⁹⁰ There was a lack of communication between the islands, a development of separate identities, and a growing consensus for self-governance in the larger islands. “The insular development of the territories militated against the creation of a common identity...”⁹¹ This further weakened the Federation.

Bustamante was vehemently against the Federation. He questioned, “What tangible immediate benefits [would] Federation bring to Jamaica.”⁹² “What does Federation mean for Jamaica? More direct taxes, tax on consumer goods, and interference in our industries...”⁹³ Bustamante believed that Jamaica would be called upon to support the less developed colonies. As a result, he placed pressure on the PNP to hold a referendum on whether Jamaica should remain or withdraw from the Federation.

Bustamante succeeded and the Jamaican referendum was held on September 19, 1961. Jamaicans were asked to vote on the question: “Do you approve of Jamaica's continued participation in the Federation of the West Indies?” Fifty-four percent voted ‘No’ and forty-six percent voted ‘Yes.’ Jamaicans preferred to focus on social and economic reforms, improved housing for the poor, and employment, instead of the government exerting efforts as part of the

⁸⁸ Stewart C. Easton, “Residual British Colonies: The Federation of the West Indies,” in *The Rise and Fall of Western Colonialism* (Pall Mall Press Limited, 1964), 349.

⁸⁹ Boxill, “The Evolution of Regionalism in the Caribbean,” 36.

⁹⁰ Boxill, “The Evolution of Regionalism in the Caribbean,” 37.

⁹¹ Boxill, “The Evolution of Regionalism in the Caribbean,” 39.

⁹² Mawby, *Ordering Independence: The End of Empire in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1947-69*, 65.

⁹³ Mawby, *Ordering Independence: The End of Empire in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1947-69*, 161.

Federation. One Jamaican citizen stated, “me no wan no middle-class Federation – me want wuk.”⁹⁴ Jamaicans argued Jamaica first and the West Indies after.

The day after the referendum result, Manley informed his Cabinet that he would “urge the Colonial Office to fix the earliest possible date for independence for Jamaica.”⁹⁵ He engaged in a series of negotiations with the other member states of the Federation and the Colonial Office to agree on the colony’s withdrawal from the Federation. Negotiations proceeded, and an agreement was finally reached in July 1962. The Federation’s terms of the agreement provided for Jamaica’s formal withdrawal, which was effective August 6, 1962, the same day Jamaica became an independent nation.

Following Jamaica’s withdrawal from the Federation, Trinidad and Tobago opted to leave the Federation. Dr. Eric Williams justified this withdrawal citing that “one from ten leaves zero.”⁹⁶ Consequently, between 1961 and 1962, “the governments of Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica busied themselves with preparation for their independence.”⁹⁷ Trinidad and Tobago became independent on August 31, 1962. The withdrawal of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago from the Federation contributed to the collapse of the Federation.

Summary

Several factors contributed to Jamaica’s independence and arguably the 1938 riots paved this path. As a consequence of the sacrifice, death, and protests of the masses of Jamaica, a change occurred. These riots led to the emergence of political parties and leadership through Manley and Bustamante to achieve constitutional reform and self-governance. The decline of the British Empire also facilitated Jamaica’s independence. Despite the establishment of the

⁹⁴ Colin Clarke, *Race, Class, and the Politics of Decolonization: Jamaica Journals, 1961 and 1968*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 147.

⁹⁵ Mawby, *Ordering Independence: The End of Empire in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1947-69*, 170.

⁹⁶ “West Indies Federation,” in *Historical Dictionary of Trinidad and Tobago*, ed. Rita Pemberton et al. (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 369-370.

⁹⁷ “West Indies Federation,” 369-370.

Federation, a growing nationalist movement evidenced by the Jamaican referendum secured Jamaica's independence from the British Crown.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued that the 1938 labor riots laid the foundation for Jamaica's movement toward independence which was achieved in August 1962. Scholars cite Jamaica's ideological shift from colonial to nationalistic, the political efforts of Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante, and the 1938 riots as major factors which contributed to Jamaica's independence. However, the lack of substantial research on the correlation between the riots and independence led to this being the focus of this study.

Primary and secondary sources were used to portray the importance of the 1938 riots to Jamaica becoming independent in 1962. The literature reviewed various aspects of Jamaica's path to sovereignty and the discussion highlighted the causes, events, and consequences of these riots.

This study will benefit researchers who wish to delve into the consequences of the riots and Jamaica's journey toward independence in a wider discussion of colonialism, decolonization, the 1930s riots in the Caribbean, the 1958 West Indies Federation and Jamaica's early political development.

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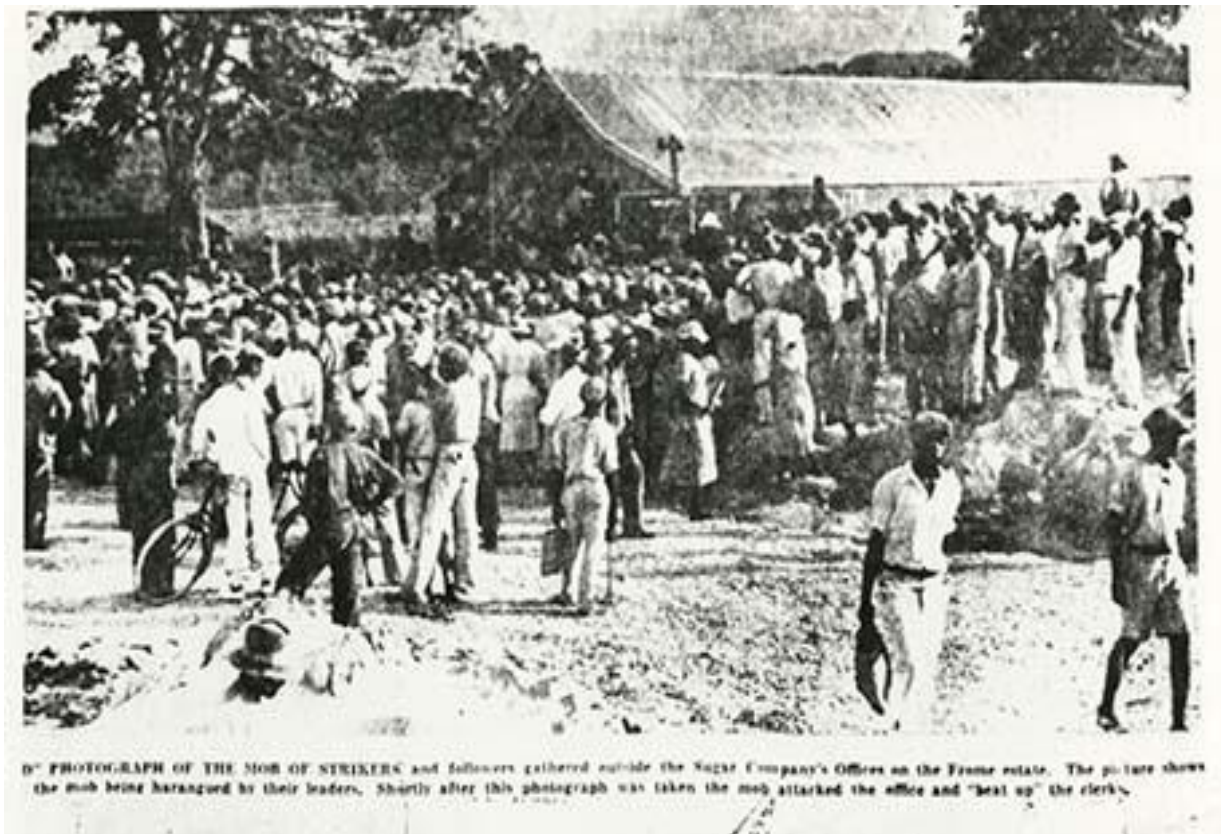
APPENDIX A

Rural Housing in Early 20th Century Jamaica. Source: National Library of Jamaica: Digital Images Collection.



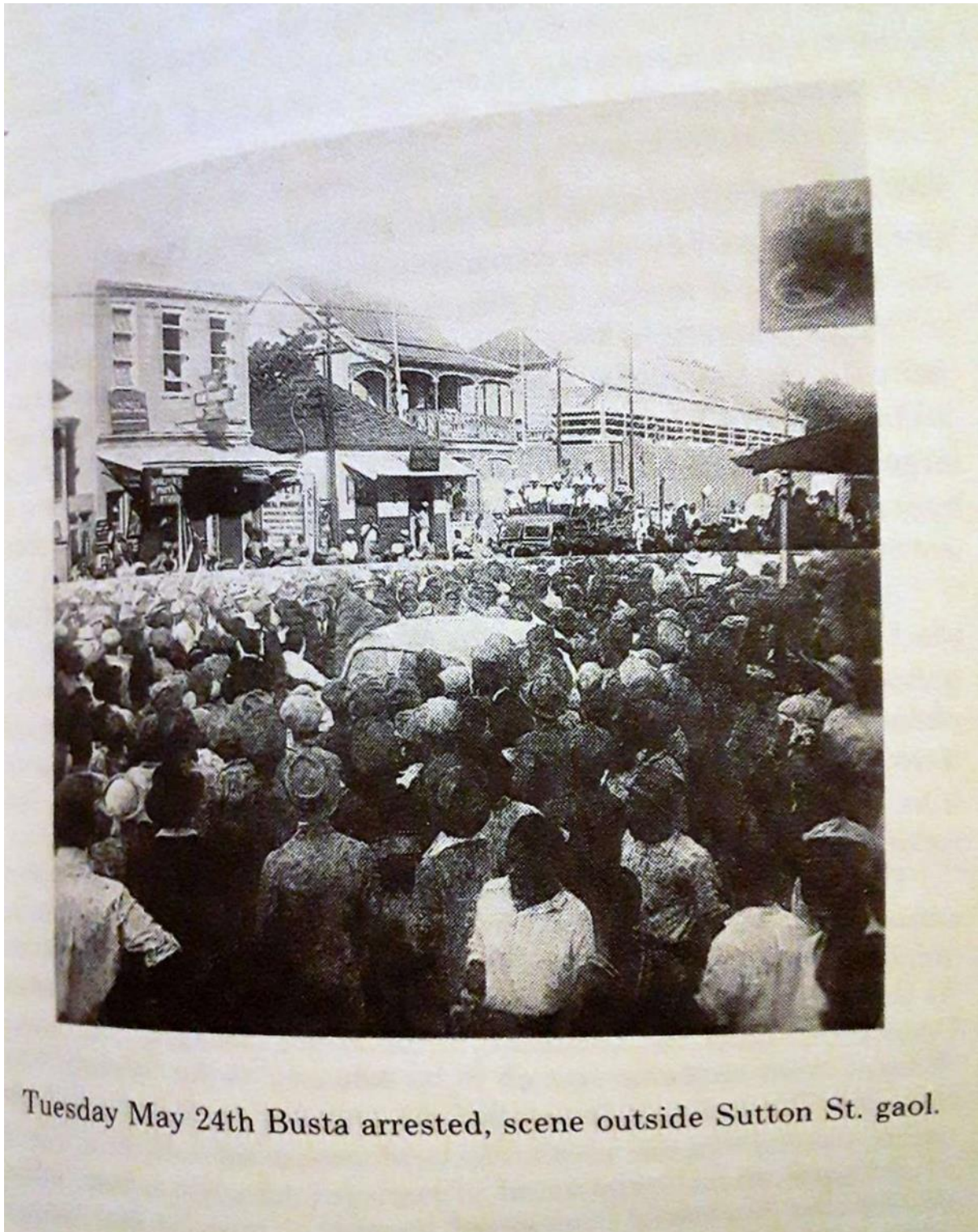
Appendix B

A mob of strikers gathered outside the Sugar Company's Offices at Frome. Source: The National Library of Jamaica Digital Images Collection.



Appendix D

Hart, Richard. "Alexander Bustamante Arrested." *Rise and Organise: The Birth of the Workers and National Movements in Jamaica 1936-1939*. Karia Press, 1989.



Tuesday May 24th Busta arrested, scene outside Sutton St. gaol.

“Rioting Again in Jamaica.” *Trinidad Guardian*, June 13, 1938.



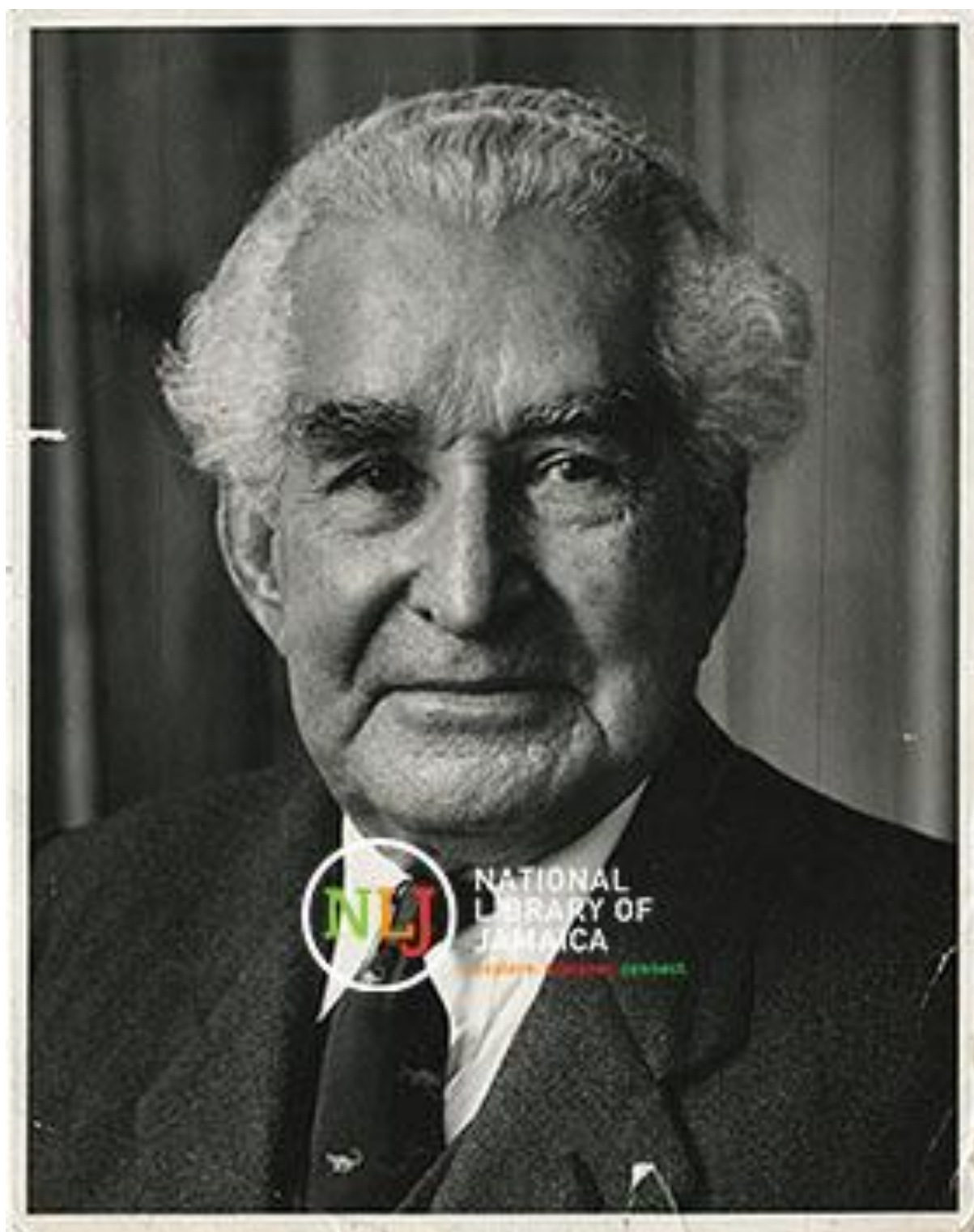
Appendix F

“Royal Commission for W.I.: Inquiry into Social and Economic Conditions.” *Trinidad*
Guardian, June 13, 1938.



Appendix G

“Photograph of Alexander Bustamante.” Extracted from Jamaica National Library Digital Images Collection.



Appendix H

“Photograph of Norman Manley.” Extracted from Jamaica National Library Digital Images Collection.

