

ABSTRACT

Labour Resistance and Protest in Barbados,

1838-1904

Henderson Delisle Carter

The dissertation addresses the theme of tension and conflict in Barbados between the black working people and the white ruling elite in the period from general emancipation in 1838 up to the inception of the mass migration to Panama in 1904. It is argued that the workers did not construct a political culture of acquiescence and docility under the refashioned institutionalised oppression that followed legal freedom. Rather, it is shown that they responded with varied methods of resistance that included production related industrial action, arson, food appropriation, frequent, localised rebellious confrontations, general widespread insurrection, and when alternative opportunities presented themselves, physical withdrawal from the plantation complex. Such actions, often triggered by the exclusionary socio-political structure, endemic poverty and disenfranchisement that shaped their social experiences, were intended to secure economic betterment, attain social justice and judicial transformation, and facilitate an ideological climate for popular democracy.

Workers, however, did secure minor modifications to the socio-economic system without which their experience could have remained slave-like. Their persistent struggle, for example, forced modifications to the Masters and Servants legislation, the critical planter-elite judicial instrument designed to achieve social control. Riots and cane fires destroyed property and undermined returns on investments, and placed the question of mass poverty and disenfranchisement on the public political agenda of the ruling elite. Furthermore, they evoked considerable apprehension among planters in the consideration of wage negotiations and labour retrenchment, and forced executive support for emigration. Such actions unsettled the elite, exerted enormous strain on the socio-political system, and succeeded in some instances in subverting aspects of public governance.

Finally, the cumulative impact of the Barbadian and Caribbean workers' resistance secured the appointment of an imperial investigative commission which afforded them an opportunity to publicly ventilate and document their case. This was particularly evident with respect to their perennial call for agrarian reform in which their landlessness would be redressed. These political activities further launched workers into a modernist culture of democratic contest and sophisticated collective negotiation. Workers understood the nature of the order that oppressed them and developed a political response informed by a search for meaningful transformation.