

LIBERIA: NEW STIRRINGS

by J. WODDIS

Formally speaking, Liberia has been an independent African state since 1847. But the independence was — and has largely remained — very limited. In the first case, this 'independent' state was settled by American Negroes, former slaves, who, despite the colour of their skin, rapidly became a new ruling caste over the indigenous inhabitants of the territory who naturally comprise the absolute majority of the population. For this majority there was no independence.

But secondly, and equally important, even this ruling group or "alien tyranny" in the words of the *Observer*, was itself not fully independent, but a puppet stratum, collaborating closely with the Western powers, especially the United States and Britain, who controlled it.

For many years Liberia's customs administration was largely run by British officials, and Britain had a key influence in the Liberian Navy whose officers and ratings were British-trained. Even the rubber concessions, for which Liberia has since become famous, were originally granted to an English company.

The Stars and Stripes

In 1910, however, the United States acquired virtually monopoly control over Liberia. The Americans took charge of finances, military organisation, agriculture and boundary questions; American officials were put in charge of the customs and other state departments; and American big business began to look for opportunities for profit making. An American-type constitution, and U.S. currency remain in use to this day.

In the 1920's the big American firm, Firestone, acquired the concessions for growing and exporting rubber from Liberia, and for some thirty years or more Liberia remained a "Firestone colony", just like one of the "banana republics" of Latin America.

The passing of the Firestone era is indicated in several ways. First, there has been a great increase in recent years in investments in Liberia by practically all the Western powers — Italy, Sweden, Holland, and especially Western Germany. Thus, the American monopoly hold is breaking down.

Secondly, by 1961 rubber was no longer the biggest earner amongst Liberia's exports. That place has now been taken over by iron ore, of which Liberia possesses vast quantities, and which is attracting most of the new capital which is pouring in.

Between 1943 and 1958, U.S. investments in Liberia soared from \$17m. to \$358m. The fact that the United States and NATO have bases here, and that Liberia has concluded a special "military assistance" agreement with the United States is not unconnected with these heavy U.S. investments.

Iron Ore

But is primarily the iron ore which is attracting American and other imperialist firms. Thus Republic Steel of the U.S. is the majority shareholder in the Liberian Mining Company which is exploiting the iron ore in the Bomi Hills.

Another major grouping, LAMCO, is "developing" (or rather, taking away) the iron ore deposits in the Nimba Mountains. This consortium includes Bethlehem Steel, as well as Swedish and German firms, including the Thyssen group. The United States Export-Import Bank is helping to finance this \$200 million project, with which Krupps are also associated.

A third key project is the Mano River mine, with which are associated the Export-Import Bank and Krupps, as well as Dutch interests.

The fourth mine, in the Bong Mountains, is dominated by a group of Ruhr steel companies who will, naturally, be buying the iron ore.

New-Look Imperialism

The imperialist exploitation of Liberia's rich iron ore resources will bring few benefits to Liberia. It is, in fact, sheer robbery.

Solid mountains of iron ore, which could be used to provide an iron and steel base for Liberia and thus pave the way to industrialisation and progress, are simply being hacked down, ton by ton, and carted away to Europe and the United States.

To this day Liberia does not possess a single mile of passenger railway, but, from each of the mines, railways are being built for the sole purpose of facilitating this immense robbery.

Describing the LAMCO project a couple of years ago in the *Daily Telegraph*, Peter Duval-Smith said "they will level a 4,000 foot mountain that is practically solid iron. They will build a 200-mile railway and harbour installations in order to carry the ore away".

Thus the mountains will disappear — and shareholders in the Ruhr, in New York and other western countries will be the main beneficiaries. And all this is called "aid."

If Liberia remains—as apparently is the policy of President Tubman — a rubber and iron ore exporter to the West, her economy will remain colonial and the people will continue to suffer.

People vs. Colonialism

Liberia's economy is completely lopsided. In the centre of Monrovia is the new luxury Ducor Palace Hotel. It is said that to build it all the building materials except stone had to be imported. Even nails!

But Liberia is not only without industry. She imports butter, cheese, milk, meat, ham, flour, rice, sugar and even some kinds of fruit.

So agriculture is neglected, in order that rubber can be grown. And indus-

try is stifled so that Liberian natural resources can be taken away.

But it is impossible to quarantine Liberia off from the great winds of liberation sweeping over Africa. A working class is growing, trade unions have been formed, and only last September a general strike of 30,000 workmen paralysed the capital for two days.

The *Observer* reports that leaflets are circulating in Liberia "urging 'the people' to follow the many examples already set for them elsewhere and to throw out their 'alien rulers'."

These new voices even exert their influence higher up, and sometimes compel the Liberian Government to take a stand more in line with the sentiments of the awakened millions of Africa.

Thus Liberia has officially introduced a total boycott of South African goods in protest against apartheid, and her spokesmen at the United Nations have spoken strongly and well on this question. Liberia even formed an association with Ghana and Guinea, though she later back-tracked and formed a bloc with Nigeria and the Brazzaville group.

Nevertheless, new assertions of sovereignty will be made, and the new voice of the working class will grow.

President Tubman is already having to take the new trends into account. Thus he is spreading education into the hinterland, and reported to be taking steps to give the indigenous people more representation and involve them more in government.

These are only small beginnings, mere adjustments to the new stirrings, to the new voices. But all does not depend on Tubman. It is inevitable that Liberia will take her place with the rest of Africa, and win her fight for economic liberation from domination by foreign monopolies.

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