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THE LONDON DAWN RAID AND ITS EFFECT ON MALAYSIAN PLANTATION WORKERS

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Abstract

The London Dawn Raid refers to the attempt by the Malaysian government to take control of the plantation giant, Guthrie Corporation at the London Stock Exchange on 7 September 1981. It was part of a strategy by which Malaysia acquired controlling interest over flagship companies owned by European plantation companies, such as Dunlop Estates and Harrisons & Crosfield (subsequently known as Golden Hope Plantations), and the export agricultural sector. These companies then started selling their shares to the newly formed Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB, National Equity Corporation), Malaysian government's investment agency. With PNB's takeover of foreign-owned plantations, the plantation workers (most of whom were Indians) had hoped for security in terms of tenure, better wages and working conditions. Their hopes were crushed as the new management was only interested in multiplying profits and

ensuring wages remained low. It also started recruiting labour from Indonesia and other countries. This article examines how the change in management affected plantation workers, especially Indian labourers and the predicament faced by the latter from the early 1980s until early 2000s.

Notes

*The author would like to thank Professor Emeritus Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown for her comments on drafts of this article.

¹'The Guthrie takeover was therefore, regarded as retaliation for this Scrooge-like British government action' (Shakila and White 2010: 19).

²Abdul Khalid Ibrahim, General Manager, Permodalan Nasional Bhd., 'Business investments and growth', <<http://mgv.mim.edu.my/MMR/8508/85805.htm>> Accessed 10 June 2010.

³Lit. son(s) of the soil, referring to the indigenous people of Malay stock and the native communities of the country.

⁴The 1948 Federation proposal denied automatic citizenship and made strict provision for acquisition of citizenship by non-Malays such as language requirement i.e. an adequate knowledge of Malay or English.

⁵Malaysian Indian Congress ([1974](#): 15, 26-8). Government allocation for the rural sector in all its economic programmes amounted to 35%. If the plantation sector was to be categorised as rural sector, the position of Indians could well be taken care of. According to Anbalakan ([2004](#): 395), 'the estimated development expenditure for rural and agricultural development was MYR2,279,000 under the Second Malaysia Plan. In the next three plans the allocations had been significantly increased to MYR6,448,250, MYR7,888,200 and MYR11,799,850 respectively' (see second to fifth Malaysia Plans). The major share of the allocations for the eradication of rural poverty was utilised specifically for the alleviation of the lot of the Malays only.

⁶FELDA was established by the government on 1 July 1956 to settle or resettle and provide employment for farmers who were landless or underemployed due to land

fragmentation and had insufficient land to meet their needs.

⁷The termination of Indian plantation workforce for the purpose of employing foreign workers is against Section 60M Employment Act 1955 which states that an employer cannot terminate the services of a local worker for the purpose of employing a foreign worker. This Act which was enacted during colonial days was intended to protect local workers. Unfortunately after independence, especially in the 1980s, mostly Indonesian foreigners, were recruited on the grounds that there was not enough labour and this move affected the wages of Indian plantation workers. The displacement that has taken place since the the 1980s to the present time is against this Act. The Act, which applies only to the private sector also regulates the hours of work, including overtime work, payment of wages, advances on and deductions from wages. It provides for the priority of wages over other debts, and the liability of principals and contractors, as well as employers, to pay wages. It also provides for a rest day, public holidays, annual leave, sick leave, maternity leave, maternity allowance, and termination and lay-off benefits. It could be concluded that the colonial laws had the welfare of the workers at heart compared to what was seen after independence (Part XII B – Employment of Foreign Employees, Section 60 M, Laws of Malaysia, Act 265, Employment Act, 1955). The Act has continuously been cited by the Labour Ministers in the Malaysian Cabinet whenever workers were made redundant by the plantation agencies in the early 2000s.

⁸Member System was introduced in April 1951 to provide self-governance. It had nine members of different communities responsible for various departments and functions of government.

⁹When the NEP was introduced, 60% of the plantations were owned by foreign companies, the rest by non-Malays and the bumiputera only owned 2% (Nickalls [1990](#): 214).

¹⁰In 1940, three-quarters of the area planted with rubber and oil palm were foreign owned. By 1972, foreign ownership had shrunk to a little over one-fifth of the total area, and by 1990 to one-tenth (see also Drabble [2000](#): 199-201).

¹¹Interview with Janakey Raman Manickam, the author of The Malaysian Indian dilemma on 18 June 2010.

¹²Evidence taken from Selvakumaran Ramachandran's field surveys carried out between 1989 and 1990. (Selvakumaran [1994](#)).

¹³The paternalistic attitude of NUPW is discussed in INSAN ([1989](#): 33-4). To quote the editor, 'In the absence of a spirit of service and sacrifice, as well as genuine community involvement, and due to the overwhelming influence of materialistic values and corruption in Malaysian society, a significant number of office holders in these three big institutions [MIC, NUPW and NLFCs] work mainly, if not solely to benefit themselves – a sad state of affairs, to say the least' (INSAN [1989](#): 34). See also, Ramasamy ([1983](#): 57).

¹⁴No date of the event was provided by the author.

¹⁵No date was cited.

¹⁶For details of the Bukit Jelutong incident, see Aliran Monthly 22(10), 2002 quoted from Tate ([2008](#): 219).

¹⁷According to Manickam (2009: 203) the government had previously allocated MYR2.9 million to provide such facilities but the estate management did not apply for the grant.

¹⁸ 'Pengusiran paksa dan pencerobohan paksa tempat tinggal bekas pekerja ladang Bukit Jelutong Rasak: tiga generasi berkorban untuk syarikat, kini dilayan macam sampah' (Forced eviction and demolition of former Bukit Jelutong Rasak Estate workers' houses: treated like dirt despite sacrificing for the company for three generations), memorandum submitted by the Bukit Jelutong Rasak Estate Residents to Kumpulan Guthrie Bhd Chairman, Musa Hitam, on 6 March 2003 (quoted in Nagarajan [2007](#): 132).



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