

The International Labour Organization and labour in the colonies:

*The labour question in the French
Cameroons, 1922-1960.*

Mofortiah Meneiymoh Eric



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Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History

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The International Labour Organization and Labour in the Colonies:

The labour question in the French Cameroons

(1922-1960)

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Universitetet i Oslo

Abstract

The end of the First World War saw a renewed international mobilization in all directions to end suffering and hardship which to a greater extent, had been produced by the war. This was seen through the organs of the newly formed League of Nations. The International Labour Organization (ILO) which was one of the earliest organizations formed as an organ of the League of Nations has since 1919 when it was created, adapted to different situations in an effort to regulate internationally. Apart from the acute situation which was witnessed in Europe immediately after the First World War, labour in the colonies was an area where the ILO even though faced with the problem of a concerted action within the organization, has worked very hard to ensure order.

This study takes the labour question to the local level; more precisely the French Cameroons. It shows the impact of the ILO's commitments to ensuring better standards particularly in the way labour was recruited and organised in the colonies and the French Cameroons in particular. The French Cameroons which happened to be placed under direct French supervision by the League of Nations is treated in detail with special focus on the way the French colonial administration on the one hand tried to unilaterally design her own labour policies specifically for her colonies and on the other hand, how the ILO tried to exert pressure on the French colonial government together with other colonial powers to implement the various labour conventions that were adopted by this organization. The study through the local initiatives and actions of the French colonial administration in the French Cameroons shows how much the French were struggling to impose their own labour standards and laws in their overseas territories against a heavier international pressure coming from the ILO Conventions, regulations and recommendations.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The International Labour Organization (ILO) from its creation in 1919 was confronted with labour problems in Europe and in the colonies. But at this early stage, the organization's focus with regard to labour conditions was more on Europe.¹ In the colonies, the ILO first tasked itself with stamping out the last vestiges of slavery and then moved on to tackling the much debated labour question. This work consists in looking at developments within the ILO in relation to colonial labour, other external pressures and how French colonial authorities in the French Cameroons either reacted or interpreted most of the ILO labour conventions.

At the end of World War 1, this former German colony was partitioned between France and Britain and then placed under the direct supervision of the League of Nations through its Mandate Commission. With the collapse of the League of Nations, the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations (UN) took the relay. This would in one way or the other affect its level of engagement and interactions with the international system. In this work, I deal specifically with the labour question in the French Cameroons.

Generally, the labour question in African colonies especially after the First World War was a complex one. This is because of the intersection of French and British colonial bureaucracies with African labour movements and the ILO. These interactions both expanded and limited the labour issue.² The labour question becomes the struggle to uphold unified, universal and acceptable labour practices and standards in the colonies. In this work, I try to capture the interactions between the ILO and the French colonial administration in the French Cameroons on labour matters which in some instances may have produced a rupture between these two actors. The ILO operating within the context of an international organization was above the French colonial administration particularly in the area of application of declarations and conventions coming from the ILO.

Even though the ILO as an international organization stood for unified international labour standards, this organization was far from being a monolithic one. This was because of the

¹ Kott Sandrine. "The forced labor issue between human and social rights, 1947-1957." *International Journal of Human Rights, Humanism and Development* 3, no.3 (2012): 321.

² Cooper Frederick. *Decolonisation and African Society: The labor question in French and British Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

differences in the handling of colonial matters by most colonial powers and opposition from other members. These differences seemed to be felt in the application of most of its resolutions and conventions. Secondly, the differences within this organization were exacerbated with the intensification of the Cold War with each bloc struggling to push forward its own conception of what really constituted forced labour. Therefore, the office's failure to obtain major concessions from the colonial powers was largely a result of the rapid deterioration of the atmosphere between the wartime allies after 1945.³ This indicates that even though the ILO is presented as an organization which from its recommendations and conventions produced well-articulated stances to condemn poor labour policies, there seemed to be opposition from within the organization. This was mainly from Britain and France at the beginning which made them to be so comfortable in their positions in the violation of ILO regulations and conventions.⁴ The admission of the US would greatly threaten the British and French comfort and the later joining of the ILO by the Soviet Union would even complicate things further.

Meanwhile, French colonial administration on her own part placed herself in a position where she tried to unilaterally handle the labour question internally. This put the French colonial administration in conflict with the ILO. The French government's refusal to ratify the ILO's Convention No.29 of 1930 until 1937 was one of the glaring instances of this rupture. The French government would give as an excuse for its refusal to ratify the Convention the meddling by the ILO in what she regarded as a national military matter.⁵ The ILO as an international organization specialized in labour matters supersedes all national or regional structures related to labour. Therefore, the ILO in this work is conceived as that world body with a strong authority in labour issues. Again, what were the circumstances under which the ILO adopted most of its resolutions on the labour question and what were the strengths and weaknesses of these resolutions with regard to their applicability in the colonial context?

The labour question in this work is taken to mean issues that pertain to colonial forced labour and also the enlargement of the labour issue to economic and social dimensions in the 1940s. By 1946, the French colonial administration embraced the colonial economic plan drafted by Albert Sarraut. Albert Sarraut was appointed Minister of Colonies in 1920 and early as 1923

³ Maul Daniel, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization: The International Labour Organization 1940-1970*(London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 87.

⁴ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 26-27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

in his book titled *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises*, he explained how this policy could be worked out. This economic plan was to be applied under the name “Fonds pour l’Investissement en Développement Economique et Social” (FIDES). The 1940s is quite symbolic as well. This was a period the Third World through representatives from India and some Middle Western countries actively participated thereby influencing the international human rights campaign and activism. Again, how were the relativists in the human rights campaign included in the forced labour narrative within the ILO especially from the 1940s onward? With the broadening of ILO’s areas of activities to include issues related to social justice and freedom of labour, the human rights is brought into the forced labour narrative.⁶ France within the context of the ILO had repeatedly used this as a means of avoiding the application of most ILO Conventions. This was also topical within the international human rights discourse.

Under these circumstances, it will be interesting to know why the French colonial administration attempted to handle the labour question as an internal issue while trying to avoid international pressure from the ILO and other international organizations. Also, how does this affect labour in the colonies? How do the colonial subjects in the French Cameroons react to this?

Once more, this work deals with the response of the French colonial administration on the labour question specifically in the French Cameroons. Therefore, it is interesting to see how the colonial administration within this period handled the labour issue in this part of the Cameroons. As from 1940, French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa became divided into two federations. This came as a result of the split in the French government following the German invasion of France during the Second World War. There was the Pro-Vichy Federation, French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa which was loyal to the Free French movement of General de Gualle. The French Cameroons was thus attached to French Equatorial Africa. This means France even though had a supervisory mandate on the French Cameroons made the territory to follow the political, economic and social development programme designed for all her other territories within the federations of Equatorial and West Africa. This consisted of designing laws that would transform the Africans into French

⁶ Burke Roland. *Decolonization and the evolution of international human rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 27.

African citizens.⁷ How did these developments affect the labour question in the French Cameroons? Given that the ILO by this time had moved from its traditional area of action to tackling other issues related to social justice, how was this reflected in the ILO's interactions with the colonial administration?

1.1 Setting the study within the context

The work centers on looking at the labour question in the French Cameroons setting. In fact, this is a theme that has been discussed more from a global and regional perspective. The French Cameroons is the main area of concern, but events related to developments within French Equatorial Africa of which it was attached to are highlighted as well.

The study runs from 1922 to 1960. Following the ousting of Germany in the Cameroons in 1916, it became an international territory supervised by the League of Nations and later the United Nations. The date 1922 is chosen as the start date of the study because it was when the French mandate administration officially began in the Cameroons (both in the British Cameroons and French Cameroons). The year 1960 is chosen as the date limit of the study because this was the year the French Cameroon gained its independence from France. As a whole, 1960 and the subsequent years may be analyzed from a different perspective since there had been transfer of power. This means that the terms of interaction between the newly independent country and international organizations like the ILO would have been revisited.

The 1920s were the early years of the ILO. In this light, the study tries to fit itself within the activities, actions, recommendations and developments taking place at that time within this organization. Running through the 1930s, 1940s and the 1950s, one is able to demonstrate how there was a broadening of the ILO's mission from purely labour matters to other areas of the economy and also social matters. The study closes in the year 1960 which fits it squarely within the colonial narrative characterized by the 'wind of change' in Africa.

1.2 Method and theory

The work is based on information gotten from archival sources and other secondary sources. With regard to the archival sources, the Cameroon National Archive located in Yaounde has

⁷ Cooper Frederick, "Reconstructing empire in British and French Africa," *The Past and Present Society* 6 (2011): 76.

been visited to obtain information. The secondary sources include books, articles and other relevant material that have been obtained from the University of Oslo library and the Paul Ango Ela resource centre in Cameroon.

In this study, I use the concept of competing universalism in order to develop the universalism theory. In fact, this theory can be situated in the way France conceptualized and appropriated the human rights discourse with opposition coming from the UN and other nations such as the US.⁸ This struggle was not only felt within the human rights debates but could be felt within the ILO. I try to analyze the actions of the ILO and those of the French colonial administration manifested in the colonies from a standpoint of two contending or competing universalisms. These contending universalisms were visible in the struggle to put in place labour regulations and standards in the colonies especially the French colonial empire during the post-Second World War era. These three contending camps during this period had opposing views as to what constituted universalism. This could be traced back immediately after the First World War when the issue of treatment of prisoners of war and political prisoners mostly in Eastern Europe came up. By this time, just the Western liberals were opposed to Social democrats with regard to what should be accepted as universal. This was heightened with the beginning of the Cold War.

Also, since the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789 by France after the French revolution, France became seen as the model of human rights and freedoms in the world. This might have pushed France to be one of the main actors spearheading the campaign for the abolition and emancipation of slaves. Since the French Revolution, France prided itself as a universal model for the world.⁹

Though France by this time was the centre of universalism, the notion was equally in deep peril, threatened by the United States as a rival universalist power on the one hand, and the formation of a new Europe on the other hand. This made the concept of universalism to be an object of intense struggle in what could be termed the French culture wars.¹⁰ To add to the new actors who through their values and activism at the international scene posed as a challenge to the French position, was a list of international organizations. After the First

⁸ Amrith Sunil and Sluga Glenda. "New Histories of the United Nations." *Journal of World History* 19, 3 (2008): 254.

⁹ Schor, Naomi. "The crisis of French universalism," *Yale French Studies* 100, France/USA: The cultural Wars (2001) 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

World War, International organizations began to be formed founded on principles associated with freedom, equality and the respect for human rights. For a long time, France had emitted these values which made her to build a reputation at the global scene. This long-standing reputation might have prompted France to believe she could assume this same role during the campaign to stamp out forced labour globally and more precisely in the colonies immediately after the First World War and in the later years. Therefore, France finds herself within the Western liberal thinking but would constantly object to the influence of the ILO to what she considered her internal military issue.

Therefore, competing universalism in this case would mean France through her colonial empire was struggling to set labour standards not so much depended on those of the ILO which was the international norm setter in labour standards. This created a situation of two extremes trying to install a universally accepted standard¹¹.

1.3 Rationale for the study

The main objective of this work is to show how France handled the labour question locally in the French Cameroons. In most cases, this debate on France and the labour question in her colonies has been focused on the bigger picture for instance within colonial power structures and colonial federations. Therefore, this study is an endeavour to take the debate to the local setting.

1.4 Research question

How did the French colonial administration deal with the labour question in the French Cameroons?

In the course of the analysis, ILO conventions, declarations and other resolutions adopted and applied globally shall be discussed. On the other hand, the various French colonial amendments in the labour sector shall be discussed as well. Attempts by the French colonial administration to either apply, object or dismiss the pressure coming from this international body shall be seen as well. The archival sources in Yaounde have been chosen because as the administrative capital of colonial the French Cameroons, it still conserves most of the

¹¹ Amrith and Sluga, "New Histories," 258.

correspondences between the local colonial administrative authorities and the French ministry of colonies and between the local administrative authorities and other international organizations especially when it comes to reports and international missions to the territory.

1.5 Scholarly debate

In the first decades of the twentieth century, scholarly production on labour in Africa was closely linked to the agenda of colonial administrations. Studies on labour were preoccupied with the understanding of African social patterns and movements of people, and they were conducted under the auspices of colonial interests eager to control the African labour force.¹²

This shows a certain level of restriction within the field of labour in Africa partly because research was still tilted towards the colonialists' interests. With the departure of the colonialists from the second half of the century, researcher's interest became broadened. Most of them no longer look at the labour question only from the colonialists' lens but they tackled issues which at times were sharply against the colonialists' perspectives.

Besides, scholars who have written on the ILO's response to labour conditions in the world and in the colonies in particular mostly concentrate on wage adjustments, trade unionism, workers' rights, workers' social conditions and others. In these studies, focus has been on the immediate period after the First World War, the period between the war and the post-Second World War period. Other scholars have also approached the topic either within the colonial context, within the Cold War context or within a context of restoration of order particularly in Eastern and Western Europe immediately after the First World War.

On a broader spectrum, this study falls under the colonial labour question situation and it focuses directly on the French Cameroons. It runs from the early to the later period of decolonization. The early period of decolonization is characterized by the struggle to end slavery and an endeavour by the ILO to end forced labour which was common in the colonies as well. Faced with the problem of post-World War II recovery and the already polarized world, how does the ILO adapt to this with regard to the labour question in the colonies? How does the French colonial administration in the French Cameroons react to the international

¹² Belluci, Stefano and Eckert, Andreas. *General Labour History of Africa: Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th-21st Centuries* (Great Britain: James Currey, 2019), 2.

pressure coming from the ILO and other international organizations? In this circumstance, it is evident that two main actors shall be of concern in this work. The ILO on the one hand and the French colonial administrators in the French Cameroons on the other hand. Both of these actors seemed to have struggled to tackle the labour question from a different perspective.

Therefore, looking at the research question, I will be investigating on the extent to which from 1922 to 1960 the ILO influenced the local labour question in the French Cameroons.

Alongside this, I will also be interested in looking at how the French attempted to make the issue an internal one within her colonies by creating structures independent of the ILO. This issue is still topical within the ILO/labour history in the colonies. It is also important to note that the labour question was one of the movers of the mass wave of decolonization in the colonies which began in the late 1950s.

Researchers and scholars have taken interest in the labour question through their engagements from different perspectives. Cooper's work treats in detail British and French colonial regimes with emphasis on the labour question. With regard to labour in French colonies in Africa, developments within the labour sector were to an extent based on French imperial economic/labour plans carefully conceived by Albert Sarraut in his publication titled *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises*.¹³ Again, from the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 to the extension of the French labour code to the colonies in 1953, the French colonial administration to a greater extent, proved that it was in charge of the design and implementation of labour regulations in her own colonies.¹⁴ This was happening within the context where the ILO was in charge of the adoption of international labour conventions that were supposed to be respected and applied globally. So, this creates a situation of two extremes where the French colonial administration was struggling to resist the pressure coming from the ILO with regard to the universally adopted labour regulations in the colonies. The work makes an extensive use of national archives of some former French and British African colonies. It makes use of ILO and UNESCO official documents.

This work contributes to the labour question debate in that it highlights the tension which existed between the labour policies in French colonies in general and those internationally adopted at the level of the ILO. It is relevant to what I discuss in this work since it connects the Cameroonian context to the general labour question. In discussing this issue within the

¹³ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

French colonial context in the French Cameroons, the international atmosphere during that period is necessary since the French Cameroons was attached to French Equatorial Africa (AEF).

Maul's work captures mainly the period characterized by the broadening or divergence of the ILO's areas of intervention to involve human rights and development. With regard to my study, Maul's work goes to strengthen the argument of a reformed French colonial policy as supported by Chafer which was aimed at delaying at all possible cost the granting of self-rule to the colonies.¹⁵ This work presents the ILO as one of the main protagonists of the decolonization process as it captures the period when dissenting voices calling for the end of colonization were most heard. As its title suggests, it also captures the period characterized by the beginning of the new operational dimension of the ILO especially after the Philadelphia Conference of 1944.

This work still visits the area of friction between the ILO and the activities of the colonial powers such as France, Belgium and Portugal. This was because the Philadelphia Conference signaled a paradigm shift in the relations between the International Labour Office and colonial governments. This struggle to control the colonial labour narrative is also highlighted by Bellucci and Eckert who believe that colonial powers during the period of their presence in the colonies largely influenced scholarly production in the field of colonial labour.¹⁶ This was because governments in the metropolises now had to make known to the local populations and had to report regularly to the office on the progress made in the implementation of recommendations from the ILO. In fact, this was what had previously applied only to Conventions adopted within the ILO.¹⁷

With regard to my work, this book still opens up issues related to the labour question. It places the labour question within a broader context by engaging the labour debate in the social and development dimension within the ILO. It raises the issue of a multiplicity of contestation avenues within the colonies since the colonial inhabitants now had at their disposal international regulatory structures within the ILO to counter those coming unilaterally from the French colonial administration. It is relevant to my work in that I would be interested in seeing how the French Cameroons within the context of human rights and

¹⁵ Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 57.

¹⁶ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 2

¹⁷ Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 78.

development as conceived by the ILO tried to oppose especially the 1944 and 1953 French colonial labour reforms coming from the Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa to those of 1944 Philadelphia Declarations, 1947 and 1957 labour conventions coming from the ILO.

Maul still in his other work traces the history of the ILO from when it was formed to the present. The main argument he puts up in this work is that forced labour as a preoccupation of the ILO had been used as a political weapon by the West notably the colonial powers to defend their interest be it in the occupied areas in Europe or in the colonies. The colonial subjects in the 1920s and 1930 were hardly considered in the forced labour discourse within the ILO but as from mid-1940, the narrative began to change in favour of a universal application of ILO conventions. This work questions as well why the issue of forced labour in the colonies even though it was so acute during this period was given less attention. If one considers the fact that the French colonial administration only ratified Convention No.29 of 1930 in 1937 on forced labour, one may begin to look for the reasons behind the hesitation. To amplify this, Cooper states that the Convention No.29 was a highly formalistic document since it did not commit the European powers to do what they had done in the past in their efforts to end slavery.¹⁸

This again indicates the area of rupture between the ILO and an endeavour by the French colonial administration to protect their own interest in the colonies.

Chafer in his own work takes on the French notion of vocation colonial (civilizing mission), the moral responsibility of the French colonial administration which is directly linked to the idea of French “universalism and the superiority of French culture.”¹⁹ Issues of colonial structure and the colonial plan aimed at ensuring continuity of strong French influence in her colonies even after independence are addressed. One of the arguments Chafer puts forward is that African political elite instead of being the main actors of the decolonization process in their respective countries became almost like spectators. He describes the independence process in French African colonies as “rushed independence” which is indicative of the type of independence designed in the French metropole.²⁰

¹⁸ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 28.

¹⁹ Chafer, Tony. *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's successful decolonization?* (New York: Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 2002), 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

This work contributes to further the debate on reformed French colonial labour policies in Africa in that it places France at the centre of the decolonization narrative since the labour question was directly linked with trade unionism. It further reveals that contrary to what the French ministry of colonies and the *évolué* (African political elite who had become assimilated) had made the masses to understand about French imperialism in Africa, these developments were tailored and checked from the French metropole. Still in relation to the labour question, it casts doubts as to the degree of sincerity of the French colonial administration. Like Oulmont, Philippe and Väisse, it focuses on French colonial labour reforms in an era where she tried to isolate herself from ILO influence.

Placed within the completion point of the decolonization period, Clauzel in his work presents the key actors of the French colonial administration in the colonies. He notes that the French colonial administrators in the French Cameroons who were directly under the Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa were those responsible for the application of French policies in her overseas colonies.²¹ He places an emphasis on the international status of the Cameroons with regard to the obligations of the League of Nations and the United Nations to this territory. By concentrating on the colonial administrators, he pits the French colonial administration to obligations of international organizations in Cameroon. This work contributes to the present study by taking the question from the global to the local level.

Kott in her article takes a retrospect on the 1930 ILO Convention on forced labour. She believes Convention No.29 was too general with regard to what constituted forced labour. The main argument raised here is that the conception of what constituted forced labour in the colonies was vague and was a mere transposition from a purely European context to the colonial one.²² When it comes to the 1940s and 1950s when the ILO decided to extend its area of operation to involve social and human rights aspects, Kott and Golb still believe that by this period workers in the colonies were not still equipped with the legal framework that could protect them from the exploitation of employers. This coupled with the fact that most of the international regulations from the ILO were still too general in nature made it possible for the colonial administrations to take advantage in order to exploit “native labour” from their colonies.²³ This work opens up the debate in which it highlights context specific issues which

²¹ Cauzel, Jean. *La France d’Outre-mer (1930-1960): Témoignages d’administrateurs et de magistrat* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 2003), 284.

²² Kott, “The forced labour issue,” 322.

²³ *Ibid.*, 324.

were at times given limited attention. This made the colonial administrations to benefit from the weakness in order to carry out practices that were contrary to international standards. This shows the need why the labour question needed to be addressed.

On a more local view point, Onana-Mfege poses the issue of General de Gaulle's respect of his engagements with the people of the French Cameroons. He revisits the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 amongst others of which the labour question kept on being one of the main issues.²⁴ Oulmont and Vaïsse in their work treat with caution the idea of France taking the frontline role in the decolonization process in her colonies south of the Sahara. To them, this was already a calculated plan in order to uphold a permanent French influence and interest in the French Cameroons.²⁵ This thinking falls partly in line with what Chafer and Onana-Mfege say about French attempts to appropriate the decolonization drive. Of course, the labour issue was part of a bigger French plan to isolate the French colonial administration from most international arrangements and treat issues internally from her federations.

Finally, Guyer who has studied issues related to the food economy in the Circumscription of Yaounde the capital of the French Cameroons and one of the 13 administrative units points to some issues related to the labour question in the French Cameroons. To him, the French colonial administration put in place a network which at the end drained the local communities of manpower thereby leading to a situation of food shortages within the local communities.²⁶ This study is relevant to my work in that it touches directly on the impact of French labour policy in the French Cameroons.

1.6 Structure of the work

The work is divided into three main chapters. It starts with an introduction where concepts related to the work are explained alongside the scholarly debate, how the study has been carried out and others.

Chapter one focuses on the French Cameroons' relations with the ILO between 1922 to the early 1940s. This was a period when the ILO's approach and scope to labour matters in the

²⁴ Onana-Mfege André-Hubert. *Les Camerounais et le general de Gaulle* (Paris:L'Harmattan, 2006), 75.

²⁵ Oulmont, Philippe and Vaïsse, Maurice. *De Gaulle et la Decolonisation de l'Afriquesubsaharienne* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 2014),187.

²⁶ Guyer, Jane I. "The food economy and French colonial rule in Central Cameroun." *Journal of African History* xix, 4 (1978): 583.

colonies was different given the context. It discusses the international obligation of the international community to the French Cameroons which makes one to see the need for ILO's engagement and involvement on labour matters in the colonies and the French Cameroons in particular given its international status at that time.

The second chapter investigates the parallel approach to the labour question by the ILO and the French colonial administration. The innovations and relaxation of the French colonial labour code immediately after the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 are discussed. These innovations and restructuring are seen within the framework of a French internal colonial plan. Side-by-side the French colonial innovations, there is the Philadelphia Declaration of 1944 as well. Is it that the French colonial administration sensed threats and danger on the labour policy she was pursuing in the colonies right from when the international community met in 1941 for the Atlantic Charter Conference or the relaxation of French colonial labour rules was out of French benevolence and good will?

Chapter three centres on the attempt of the international community to reframe the labour question. This is discussed against the background of the organization of two main international conferences on labour, one within the auspices of the ILO and the other by France. All these had direct implications on the labour situation in the French Cameroons. Other issues discussed in this chapter include the expansion of the labour question to include social and human rights issues. This period runs from the early 1940s to 1960 when the French Cameroons was granted independence. It also falls within the post-World War II period characterized by bipolarity and the emergence of the Third as a contender in some areas of strong international influence such as the human rights. There is an interplay between this new world order and the labour question. The work ends with a conclusion.

2 LABOUR SITUATION IN THE FRENCH CAMEROONS DURING THE INTER-WAR YEARS (1922-1940)

The rules on the recruitment of labourers in the *Noun* (Bafang) region have never been applied practically... most of the labour recruitment process around the main chieftaincies consists of a social necessity of decongesting the population in these areas- Raymond, colonial administrator Bafang Subdivision.²⁷

This period was generally characterized by the full implementation of French-designed labour policies in the French Cameroons and other territories of the two French colonial federations of French Equatorial Africa and French West Africa. These labour policies would respond to the new exigencies and could as well be moderated upon. This was also a period when France seemed to have evaded the application of ILO conventions on labour or simply interpreted the different conventions' resolutions in order to suit itself. This chapter analyses both the labour policies in the French Cameroons and the major ILO Conventions within this period. The chapter equally focuses on how France put in place a labour policy during these early years in the administration of her newly acquired territory, the French Cameroons. It targets the interactions between this territory and the French Ministry of colonies which indirectly also ex-rays the ILO's commitments to the labour question in the colonies. This is studied against the background of some of the early ILO Conventions against slavery and forced labour. Also, about the territory's relations with a broader international system, it appears there would be a mark difference with its post-1940 relations. What were the prevailing circumstances both at the global and local levels with regard to the labour question during this period? How did both the French colonial administration in the French Cameroons and the ILO tackle the situation and how did all these moves resonate in the colonies particularly the French Cameroons?

²⁷Archive Nationale Yaoundé (ANY), Affaires Politiques et Administratives (APA) 11820/B. Rapport administrative du chef de la subdivision de Bafang, Septembre 1937.

2.1 France unilaterally designs labour policies in her colonies

The labour policies which the French colonial administration designed made use of agents in order to facilitate their application. These agents were chiefs and other local traditional rulers. The role of the agents became pivotal in sustaining the system. The recruitment of labourers was organized in a way that there was almost a fair distribution of labourers in all the 13 Circumscriptions in the French Cameroons.

This colonial strategy was not just characteristic of the French Cameroons experience. Elsewhere in Ghana, it has been seen how other densely populated areas in the southern part of the colony were used as labour pools to serve the sparsely populated areas.²⁸ This constitutes what is termed “native labour” which is what delegates and experts who met and deliberated on ILO Convention 29 of 1930 had struggled to regulate.²⁹ Since the colonial administration heavily relied on native labour, it seemed controversial as it touched on colonialists’ interest.

Looking at the French Cameroons, this former German territory was administered as an international territory alongside its other part (the British Cameroons) by the British.

As has been highlighted in the introduction, the French colonial authority over the French Cameroons began with the putting in place of a colonial administration in 1922. This year coincided with Albert Sarraut being appointed as the new Minister of Colonies. This would have an impact on the colonial economic planning which would also have an influence on the way labour would be organized in French colonies, Cameroon included. This is because great stress would be laid on the economic policy of *la mise en valeur* (economic development) by which the economic potential of each colony would be developed along lines most profitable in each situation.³⁰ This was an economic plan which according to Sarraut would make the colonies self-sustaining. It would encourage the colonial inhabitants to partake more economically in the development of their colonies. On the other hand, it would be supportive of both the French colonial mission of development and the metropolitan economy. In brief,

²⁸ Akurang-Parry, Kwabena Opare. “Colonial Forced Labor for road-building in Southern Ghana and the international anti-forced labor pressure”, *African Economic History* 28 (2000) 14.

²⁹ Kott, “The forced issue,” 23.

³⁰ Le Vine, Victor T. *The Cameroons from Mandate to Independence*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964) 90.

Sarraut also argued that this policy would work both for the benefit of France's needs and that of the colonies.³¹

In fact, during this period there was a sudden policy shift within the French public opinion. The Left and the centre-left who had previously opposed the acquisition of colonies by France during the nineteenth century were now not only in support of colonies but became active supporters of a French colonial empire. The French colonial empire in this case was the French overseas possession especially in Africa where France still had a strong grip. Behind this change of heart lay the growing conviction that associating the colonies with the metropole would benefit both.³²

Looking at this policy which France adopted towards the colonies, it is understood that this was in a period when the world particularly an economically embattled France had just come out of a world war. She seemed not to be in a better position to contribute a greater portion in the running cost of administration in her colonies. France needed raw materials from her overseas colonies. These indicate that France was not in good shape economically to contribute to the economic development of her colonies. From an understanding of Sarraut's economic plan, one would have believed that this economic plan would mean that the French colonial administration was to contribute largely through the financing of projects but in reality, this would mean that the colonial inhabitants had to do this through native labour.

Convention No. 29 of 1930 was one of the earliest steps taken by the ILO in the fight against forced labour particularly in the colonies. This seemed to be the first real move by the ILO to assume its normative role by adopting a decision which touched on the labour situation in the colonies. This international convention against forced labour was a product of the hard work undertaken by the Committee of Experts which met in 1929. In fact, the Convention was adopted in a context characterized by colonial exploitation in the inter-war years with the aim of regulating 'native labour'.³³ Its stress on the term 'native labour' signifies the precision of context and the acute nature of activities that were being carried out by most of the colonial administrations in the colonies during this period. During this period, the French Cameroons' protests and contestation of French mandate over the territory began to gather especially in the later part of the 1920s. In the 1930s, it became more common. These protests centered

³¹ Le Vine, *The Cameroons from mandate*, 90.

³² *Ibid.*, 84.

³³ Kott, "The forced labour issue, 323.

mainly on the labour question and the way the local population was treated by the French administration.³⁴The system was organized in a way that it heavily relied on native labour. Meanwhile, in a letter to the High Commissioner of French Cameroons in 1932, he was instructed to produce a secular which would be read in all the Catholic churches in Yaoundé emphasizing the need for all Christians to partake in railway construction.³⁵

Based on the trend of events in the French Cameroons during this period, it is important to stress on the fact that the French administration also saw an eminent danger of German return in full scale. This was because since 1924, Germany through its businessmen and plantation operators had successfully secured the economic power in the Cameroons more precisely in the British Cameroons. The French colonial administration would use this as an excuse to impose forced labour regimes in the territory as a means of asserting their authority in the territory and also as a means of dissuading those who still had pro-German sentiments.

Germany, the former colonial administering power of the Cameroons had extracted labour from the local population through means which could be likened to forced labour as well but after the First World War, there was a reformed international labour policy and a more organized international system with the creation of the League of Nations. The entire German colonial rule in the Cameroons was characterized by the absence of an international regulatory framework. From 1919, the ILO began to play the role of an international norm setter when it comes to labour matters. Therefore, inasmuch as colonial inhabitants of which French Cameroons was part, found on their side the ILO, they also realized that the French in general adopted administrative policies which were not similar to those of the Germans and strongly favoured forced labour.³⁶ Still in line with this, Convention 29 was a reworked version of the Slavery Convention of 1926 addressed on the issue of forced labour with regard to the colonial context. It went beyond a mere transposition of ideas and concepts best applicable to European or Western contexts to that which reflected the colonial realities.³⁷

It may be erroneous to completely dismiss the 1926 Slavery Convention as being an out-of-context initiative since it was principally adopted with the aim of stamping out the last vestiges of slavery. If one takes this question further to the local level specifically to the French Cameroons setting, it may hold true to a greater extent. Looking at the process of

³⁴ A. N. Y, A.P.A. 10190, *Activités anti-françaises* no. 85, 10 October 1935.

³⁵ A.N.,Y, A.P.A. 10384, *Chantiers de Chemins de fer*: culte no.191, 1923.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Kott, "The forced labour issue", 323.

recruitment of labourers for road and railway construction including other public projects of the colonial administration, one is bound to take a critical analysis of the issue. The role of the traditional rulers as main agents in ensuring a constant supply of labourers in these public construction sites is important. This exercise appears to have been dominated by instances characteristic of slavery. For instance, the case of a local chief within the Yaoundé Circumscription became so alarming with him having a vast cultivation field where forced labour was supplied by his subjects together with his numerous wives and children. In fact, this is just one of the so many cases which existed in the French Cameroons. The colonial administration seemed to have decided to let go cases as such since the local chief equally supplied the administration with labourers for public construction projects mostly road maintenance, railway construction and in the agricultural sector.

Alongside the recruitment of labourers for public work by the colonial administration which was some sort of an obligatory public service (*Prestation*), there existed labour requisition from some influential local traditional rulers. Most requisitioned labour flowed from chiefs who responded from pressures from the colonial administration. Chiefs often had a wide latitude in choosing recruits for requisitioned labour, and some chiefs used such authority to favour friends and kinsmen and harm rivals. This was a common practice in Kenya where chiefs became big men and very important allies to the colonial state.³⁸ Requisition was not only visible in the labour domain as it was extended to the food supply sector. This was mainly food destined to workers in public construction sites and the European colonial administration. The main agents were local traditional chiefs who were assigned seasonal quotas to produce for the railway construction sites. In addition to ensuring requisitioned labour, they were tasked with feeding the labourers working in areas where their villages were located. In the French Cameroons case, these chiefs were also allocated regular amounts for delivery to Yaounde markets on a pre-established schedule.³⁹ This is the description of how things were done in the Yaounde *Circumscription*.⁴⁰ This exercise was same in all other Circumscriptions in the French Cameroons particularly those areas where the railway passed. The process was an organized chain where the main chiefs (paramount rulers) gave instructions to their subordinates about what was required of them.

³⁸ Belluci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 89.

³⁹ Guyer, "The food economy", 583.

⁴⁰ Circumscriptions were the main administrative divisions in the French Cameroons. They could be modern day cities. During the period of French colonial administration, they divided the territory into 13 Circumscriptions with the Yaounde Circumscription as the overall administrative capital of the French Cameroons.

It is important to make mention of the symbol and role of a traditional ruler in a typical African and French Cameroonian setting. He was feared and respected by his subjects no matter the circumstances. He was a symbol of an unquestionable authority which means that his decisions were unchallenged. He was all powerful as the chief judge and the head of the traditional army for his subjects. His subordinate chiefs and subjects also paid taxes to him. This is what obtained during the pre-colonial period and to a greater extent in the colonial period. This is because the French colonial administration even though had put in place the overall administrative structure, they still made these traditional rulers to retain most of their powers since they were used as auxiliaries to the colonial administration.

When the French colonial administration noticed the influence of the traditional rulers or chiefs, they made them auxiliaries or aids to the colonial administration without necessarily discouraging most of their practices which curtailed the rights and freedoms of their subjects. This may explain why these traditional rulers were agents of a process which led to instances that could be likened to slavery. This is because they forcefully recruited their own subjects to furnish the colonial administration with. This as has been highlighted above was through requisition and coercion in some instances. But the French colonial administration upon making their reports on the labour situation in the territory kept on insisting that this practice was rooted in the African traditional communal system. The French colonial administration elsewhere and in the French Cameroons having noticed the influence of the traditional rulers on the population under their jurisdiction or chieftaincies logically saw that they would be efficient auxiliaries to the colonial administration.

For instance, in the French Cameroons, at the death of Zogo Fouda Ngonu of the Yaounde Circumscription it was discovered that of the 583 widows he left behind, only a few had ever performed any functions other than those of farm labourers.⁴¹ This seemed to be the way most of the traditional rulers related with their subjects. The situation remained almost the same with the taking over of the territory by the French. This instance and others are confirmed by the report on the life of one of the wealthy and influential chiefs in the Yaoundé Circumscription.⁴²

Another example is that of Charles Atangana. He was one of the paramount chiefs in the Circumscription of Yaoundé who had served under the German administration with much

⁴¹ Guyer, "The food economy," 587.

⁴² A. N., Y. A. P. A. 11822, Dossier *ZogoFouda*.

power and favour from the Germans.⁴³ When the Cameroons was placed under the League of Nation's Mandate Commission and having seen some of his powers reduced, he decided to contact the administration directly. In some of his correspondences to the French colonial administration, he is seen as literally begging on the administration to restore his lost glory and to make him continue with his much profitable practice of recruiting and supplying the administration with labourers for public work.⁴⁴ He as well begged that the administration should make him have more influence on a vast area. This would mean accumulating more for himself as one of the main suppliers of labourers and other tips from the administration.⁴⁵ Another issue which is portrayed in this document is the use of coercion. This was generally symptomatic of the disguised method of labour recruitment by the European powers.⁴⁶ These methods made use of intimidation and threats in most cases. In fact, this method was used alongside other major recruitment methods such as *prestation*, *indegenât*, *deuxième portion du contingent*.

This is an indication of how the traditional rulers during this period benefited from the administrative structure which empowered certain chiefs particularly those in densely populated areas to uphold and promote what was being condemned and discouraged at the international level particularly within the ILO. From the above, it shows that just as these traditional rulers were using this type of forced labour to cultivate their own farms, they were tasked by the administration to recruit workers for public work and in farms designated by the administration as experimentation sites and where some of the food to feed the Frenchmen principally the administrators was grown. These agricultural experimentation centres were found in the Circumscription of Yaoundé in the neighbourhoods of Tsinga, Mvog-Beti and others. From these centres, well selected foodstuffs from specially cultivated and best crop harvest of the local farms of influential traditional rulers around were sent to the *économat*.⁴⁷ The specially selected farm produce was taken to these centers where it was sold.⁴⁸ The *économat* was a shop not located in the city center like other shops. It was located slightly away from the city center around where the European population and *évolués* community lived.

⁴³ Quinn, Frederick. "Charles Atangana of Yaoundé" *The Journal of African History*, 21, 4 (1980) 486-487.

⁴⁴ Quinn, "Charles Atangana of Yaounde," 488.

⁴⁵ A.N.Y., A.P.A 11819, *Charles Atangana et le chef de la region de Nyong et Sanaga*, 23 Août 1948.

⁴⁶ Maul Daniel Roger "The International Labour Organization and the struggle against forced labour from 1919 to the present day," *Labour History* 48, 4 (2007): 479.

⁴⁷ Guyer, "The food economy," 586.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 586.

Meanwhile, it was during this period France started implementing *Prestation* or the *travail obligatoire* known as the obligatory public service in her new colony in the Cameroons. *Prestation* as the French colonial administration conceived it, was a ‘formal means’ of forcing Africans to labour on public work projects. It is believed this was a colonial project which began to be nursed both by French and British colonial administrators in Africa just in the years leading to the First World War where the number of days required for *corvée* began to be fixed.⁴⁹ This means that this labour policy which appeared to be new in the French Cameroons as a result of the fact that they were newly introduced to French rule had already been tested in other French colonies in Africa such as Ivory Coast, Senegal, Congo Brazzaville and others. In French Africa, *prestation* was a form of annual labour tax, by which all able-bodied men were required to work for a set number of days on public work projects. Legislation set the maximum number of days of obligatory labour but gave the various colonies latitude in setting the exact duration, which ranged from eight to thirteen days every year.⁵⁰ In essence, *prestation* was one of the means through which the French recruited “free labour” which was used in most of the administrative projects.

Since the legislation on *prestation* allowed the different colonies to set the exact duration for the service, in the French Cameroons, it was set for ten days per year. The *prestataires* as they were called after performing the obligatory ten days could continue working if they desired. The supplementary days were then subject to a salary which was calculated based on the local prices of goods in the French Cameroons.⁵¹ This seemed to be in line with the ILO’s demand during this period when it pressed for a shift from free labour to wage or paid labour but this came with other constraints. African labourers now sold their labour at poor rates offered by employers, settlers, capitalists and colonial administrators who usually organized cheap labour out of the labour market.⁵²

The above showed instances of labour recruitment in the French Cameroons. The international circumstances were a focus on the condemnation of slavery sanctioned by the Slavery Convention. From the presentation of the situation above, it is clear that this Convention was relevant to the situation in the French Cameroons following the way in which traditional rulers exerted their influence over their subjects and their close family members.

⁴⁹ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 94.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵¹ Guyer, “The food economy,” 593.

⁵² Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 84.

This Convention is equally relevant to the French Cameroons context if one takes into consideration the collaborative relationship between the French colonial administration and the traditional rulers in the labour recruitment exercise.

Another problematic area within the labour discourse was the institution of *Deuxième portion du contingent* or simply called *deuxième portion*. In West and Central Africa France set up the *Deuxième portion du contingent*, a form of conscription into the workforce disguised as military service in which ‘recruits’ were put under military supervision for a certain period and forced to perform whatever work they were given.⁵³ As has been presented in previous discussion, this was a process where those not needed in the army or deemed unfit to continue the military service upon recruitment were used as labour reserve or a pool from which labour could be gotten at any time. It is believed that in order for the French colonial administration to blur the real intention and purpose of the *deuxième portion*, they had to institute some remuneration to the recruits after a certain period of service.⁵⁴

Shifting the narrative to the French Cameroons context, the normal routine of the administration as it operated elsewhere was going on particularly in the major cities of Yaoundé, Douala, Edea, Kribi, Nyong et Sanaga, Dschang and others. It is important to note that the Germans upon their departure from the Cameroons had either left some public projects uncompleted, destroyed some as a war tactic or simply destroyed some of the infrastructure in order to prevent the Anglo-French contingent from benefiting from them.⁵⁵

There was also the *indigénat* which was a set of legal dispositions permitting immediate repression without judgement. It was a poly where colonial administrators were empowered to punish Africans without recourse to a court of law.⁵⁶ This means those that were applied under *indigénat* were never written as this was a set of punishment for anything a French administrator deemed offensive to him. In line with this Le Vine states,

⁵³ Maul, “The International Labour Organization,” 479.

⁵⁴ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 38.

⁵⁵ Essomba, Philippe-Blaise. “La Guerre de voies de communication au Cameroun, 1914-1916.” *Guerre Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* 248, Les guerre en Afrique de 1914 au début du XXI e Siècle (2012) 12.

⁵⁶ Ngoh, Victor Julius, “The political evolution of Cameroon, 1884-1961” (Master’s thesis in History. Portland State University, 1979), 32.

The *indigénat* was used in the Cameroons to punish natives who failed to cultivate their gardens or work on the railway, who failed to pay their taxes within three months of its levy, who failed to take off their caps in the presence of the local administrator, who spat on the floor of a government office, who had not kept an appointment with the local *chef de subdivision*, who had come late to work on a work project and so on.⁵⁷

The above indicate that they were mostly offenses which had to do with minor issues of morality. These instances made the French administrator to punish the natives through other means which could be likened to forced labour. This was one of the major grievances which led to protests against French rule in Cameroon during this period. It seemed to have been the unjust punishment meted on the indigenes by the administrators.⁵⁸ Looking at the *indigénat* from an economic perspective, the policy became a replacement of the forced labour system to a system through which colonial administrations generated finance. This was in the form of taxation through labour tax. This was mostly common in French and Portuguese colonies.⁵⁹

The penitentiary also used forced labour as part of its method of punishment, reformation and extraction of prison fines from prisoners. At a period when the French colonial administration needed most manpower for public construction projects to boost agricultural production, the cultivation of cash crops and others, prisoners were highly sought after. Prisons in colonial Africa provided a stream of coerced labour for public work and private enterprises. Prisoners everywhere were under compulsion to work on the maintenance of the prison itself.⁶⁰ This is an indication that apart from communities serving as pools of labour, individuals serving prison sentences were potential targets for forced labour.

Looking at the French colonial labour policies from another dimension, it may go to buttress the fact that the French still thought they could appropriate the universalism discourse. This was owing to the days of the French Revolution where France had made a name for being the centre of concepts associated with morality such as freedom, equality and the respect of human rights. Through the labour policies she unilaterally applied in her colonial empire it seemed they were parallel with the universal labour standards set by the ILO. This struggle to appropriate the moral values made France to constantly refer to France' mission in the

⁵⁷ Le Vine, *The Cameroons from the mandate*, 101.

⁵⁸ A. N. Y, A.P.A. 10190, *Activités anti-françaises* no. 85, 10 October 1935.

⁵⁹ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*. 87.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

colonial world as a moral duty or the *vocation coloniale* and phrases such as the *French grandeur* were used.⁶¹

2.2 Initiatives within the ILO to address the labour question (1922-1940)

As has been mentioned earlier, the Cameroons a former German colony which had become partitioned between France and Britain was now two separate international territories. One part was placed under British administration and the other under French administration. They were separated by a well-defined international boarder that had been demarcated since 1915. Therefore, in 1922, these mandated powers merely presented the partitioned territory to the League of Nations and just like other former German colonies and those of her allies, the Cameroons was placed under the League of Nation's Mandate System. Making reference here to the international community would imply looking at the labour question from an international perspective more especially through the lens of the ILO which was by now a community of nations working to improve labour conditions globally through the setting of international norms. It is necessary to look at the major convention adopted by the ILO during this period.

2.2.1 The 1926 "Slavery Convention"

It is important as well to look at what was going on at the international level with regard to the issue of labour particularly in the colonies. This was when French and British labour policies in French Equatorial Africa, Ghana, Kenya and in other parts of East Africa were fast coming under the spotlight. But the prevailing circumstances of post-World War 1 indicated that the world at large would obviously be confronted with enormous challenges, especially economic issues. These challenges began showing up even in Europe before the very eyes of the major Western powers particularly in Germany and the Soviet Union where the labour situation became so acute necessitating international concern and action. Even though the labour issue seemed to be crucial necessitating an international action, it was unfortunately

⁶¹ Chafer, "The end of empire," 3.

during the period when the confrontation between the East and the West was beginning to gather storm which played on the international resolve to tackle the labour situation.⁶²

Despite this, the League of Nations as early as 1926 passed the “Anti-Slavery Convention”. This indicates that as early as the 1920s, the eye of the international community was already on labour conditions as a whole and particularly the situation in the colonies. But Cooper sees the 1926 “Slavery Convention” as a formalistic document, almost entirely in the framework of the anti-slavery ideology of the late nineteenth century which mainly committed European powers to doing what they had already done in the past.⁶³ This included suppressing the last vestiges of slave trade entirely and “bring about progressively and as soon as possible, the complete abolition of slavery in all its forms.”⁶⁴ This document even though was already a warning signal, can be seen from different angles since it was drawn up at a period when the world particularly the colonial inhabitants were seriously affected. Therefore, being forced to work was similar but not identical to the definition of slavery as used in the 1926 Slavery Convention.⁶⁵ The above presentation of events in the French Cameroons during this period shows that this 1926 Convention was relevant to the Cameroonian context to an extent given the role played by the traditional rulers.

The “Anti-Slavery Convention as Cooper points out was a was a global campaign whose context was almost misplaced. This was because the global anti-slavery campaign had long been won to a greater extent even though some few isolated cases of slavery could still be spotted. Also, this document fell short of the reality staring the colonial world in the 1920s which was more related to the way the colonial administrations recruited labour and the conditions in which the labourers performed work. The concept of free labour seen as one of the core values of African communal life is interpreted and presented at the international level by colonial governments as compulsory labour. This means that with it being seen as synonymous to compulsory labour, the colonial administrations find reasons for using forms of coercion to extract communal labour. Since forced labour is heavily depended on coercion, communal labour something not done out of free will. The burning issue at stake still seemed to be the labour question and more precisely the forced labour issue. By referring to the issue globally as an issue associated with slavery meant that the League of Nations was missing the

⁶² Kott, “The forced labour issue,” 324.

⁶³ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 28.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁵ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 79.

point. This was being evasive on the pressing issue in the colonies globally. Faced with criticisms on this Convention, the League of Nations solicited assistance from the ILO to conduct an investigation on “the best means of preventing forced or compulsory labour from developing into conditions analogous to slavery.” This challenge was taken up by a Committee of Experts from the ILO.⁶⁶ The astonishing thing during this period also was that the colonial powers in order to defend their labour recruitment process would present it as something associated with the African communal lifestyle.

These seemed to be constructions that were made by the French, British, Portuguese and Belgian colonial administrations to suit their labour recruitment agenda which seemed not to be a true reflection of the concept of communal labour in the African traditional society. What the colonial administrations projected with regard to the concept of communal labour differed greatly from the real sense of the concept when it came to the colonial inhabitants sustaining the colonial administration with free labour. Okia, taking the example of the Kenyan experience of British colonial rule still on the issue of communal labour believes that,

State manipulation of forced labor in colonial Africa was intertwined with the central issue of development... As a contradiction of colonial rule, forced labor in Kenya became an incendiary topic. It was assiduously depicted as slavery in another form by humanitarian organizations like the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society and condemned by missionaries like Owen. Despite the connotation with slavery, the state continued to use it. It was essential to the political economy of Kenya.⁶⁷

The above articulation of the labour question in the British colony of Kenya indicates the way the colonial administrations in Africa during this early period in the struggle to end forced labour was confronted with the problem of misconception. The international community seemed to have believed that communal labour was synonymous to free labour offered by the colonial inhabitants to the colonial administration. This seems misleading as it was a tool which the colonial administration heavily relied on in the recruitment of forced labour process. In a purely African traditional society when one talks of communal projects or labour, one talks of community development. Therefore, by equating the labour issue to

⁶⁶ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 29.

⁶⁷ Okia, Opolot. *Communal labor in colonial Kenya: The legitimization of coercion, 1912-1930*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1912), 31.

development, the colonial governments seemed to have blurred the labour question to make it seem as if it was something strongly embedded in the African communal life whereas they employed coercion and intimidation. In fact, organizing communal labour was part of community life in Africa but it was usually done out of free will by the members of the community. Even after Churchill's dispatch which was an amelioration of government forced labour policy in the British colonies, forced labour still persisted even though it was now done through the approval of the colonial office.⁶⁸ This indicates that forced labour was restrained to an extent. Generally, the international community had greatly supported the holding of the conference which led to the adoption of the convention but the one unfortunate thing was that the colonial powers during the conference so much opposed resolutions which strongly condemned labour policies in the colonies.⁶⁹ This seems to show the delight or benefit the colonial powers were reaping through the persistence of forced labour in their respective colonies. Their opposition to any attempt of reforming labour policies through the enactment of regulations which would threaten their interest in the colonies. As earlier highlighted, this seems to be one of the main reasons why the Slavery Convention in itself was not so specific.

Generally, from the mid-1920s, the ILO's native labour section became very active in gathering data in the colonies on forced labour and its abuses even though networks of individuals and non-governmental organization were not very cooperative.⁷⁰ This indicates that the ILO during these early years of its creation already identified some major concerns of the labour question in the colonies. The resolve and contextualization of the labour questions in the colonies by the ILO appears to have been obscured to an extent during these early years mainly because in addition to the obstruction from individuals and non-governmental actors, representatives of colonial governments prevented this international organization from working. To the representatives of colonial governments, any restrictions on forced labour would hinder their civilizing missions and the tasks of promoting economic and social development in respective colonies.⁷¹ Therefore, these actors made the task and resolve of the ILO to be difficult thereby blurring most of the initiatives of the organization during these years.

⁶⁸ Okia, *Communal Labor in colonial Kenya*, 82.

⁶⁹ Maul, "The International Labour Organization," 480.

⁷⁰ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 79.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

2.2.2 Convention No.29 of 1930 and the labour question

This was the first international convention against forced labour in which the ILO was fully involved, and it was adopted from within the ILO itself. Also, this convention tackled labour concerns of the time to an extent. Again, this convention was specific to an extent rather than being so general as the 1926 “Slavery Convention.” Between the 1920s to 1931, colonial administrations had leaned on a type of forced labour policy to facilitate road-building which is described in the records as “unskilled labour” policy.⁷² This case is cited in one of the localities in Ghana but it indicates some level of uniformity with regard to the overall labour policy pursued by the colonial administrations which needed some international attention to set some limits and to define what really constituted forced labour.

This would lead to the adoption of a more relevant convention which addressed the issues at stake, the 1930 Forced Labour Convention. The passage of the ILO’s Forced Labour Convention in 1930 further limited the use of coercion. This amelioration of coercion when it came to forced labour recruitment did not affect communal labour in any way.⁷³ This is because it was forbidden for private purposes but yet remained in use for public work by the colonial administration. For instance, in the British colony of Kenya where communal labour was widely used in the 1920s, the colonial administration met with strong criticism and opposition from Archdeacon Walter E. Owen. This was because of the abuses which especially the inhabitants of the Kisumu local district suffered under the agents (mostly local traditional rulers) of the British colonial administration in the area.⁷⁴ Owen was so bitter about the way the local population was forced to perform the so-called communal labour. The local traditional rulers popularly referred to it in most societies as chiefs had strong influence in the community owing to the fact that they were well respected, feared and commanded authority and were the seat of power. Therefore, the colonial administration noticing this decided to make them representatives of the colonial administrations. This would facilitate their dealing with the community without much obstruction since instructions would be merely passed from the colonial administration to the chiefs whose authority would not be challenged by the subjects.⁷⁵ These qualities of the traditional ruler were almost conventional all over Africa. An example could be cited of the role played by Charles Atangana in the French Cameroons

⁷² Akurang-Parry, “Colonial forced labour” 12.

⁷³ Maul, “The International Labour Organization”, 18.

⁷⁴ Okia, *Communal Labor in colonial Kenya*, 96.

⁷⁵ Nzula A. T., Potekhin I. I. and Zusmanovich A.Z., *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa* (London: Zed Press, 1979) 164-165.

in facilitating the French colonial administration's drive to give a new meaning of communal labour to the international community at that time.

One sees Owen's frustration and campaign against the colonial administration as justified. This is because the concept of communal labour in the African traditional society was based on consensus, understanding within the community members, voluntary in some cases but never extracted using force. In most cases, the community members were happy to offer their services for community work. The way it was now reconceived by the colonial administration left critics wondering. To support this, Okia states that communal labour in the real African context was most often casual in their requirements and were certainly not binding. Colonial communal labour, now defined by the state but intended to be a continuation of traditional tribal duties, frequently went beyond the requirements of communal necessity and involved heavy doses of coercion.⁷⁶

In the French Cameroons, the case was not different. In fact, it was even more severe as right from the beginning of the mandate administration in the French Cameroons, there were protests and riots with regard to her policies. *Indigénat* and *Prestation* were policies which most often resorted to the use of forced labour.⁷⁷ These harsh French colonial labour policies were at the heart of most of the protests in the territory. Things became worsened as from the mid-1930s when the world was preparing to go to war again. These policies were carried out in all of the 13 Circumscriptions which made up the French Cameroons.

Looking at the ILO which was one of the organs of the League, the 'colonial clause in its 1919 constitution reserved the metropolitan powers the right to exclude, in part or entirely, their overseas territories from the ratification of norms made it difficult to apply ILO standards in colonial territories.⁷⁸ The 'colonial clause' stands out to be one of the contradictions coming from the ILO which was an international norm setter in matters of labour. In the subsequent chapters, it will be seen how to an extent the colonial powers would exploit this to their favour probably as a result of fear of being exposed or opened to scrutiny. This may later be one of the justifications for France's refusal to ratify the 1930 Convention on Forced Labour. Again, the Native Labour Code (NLC) which was seen to be relaxed to an extent as concerns instances of forced labour was applied separately from the other ILO

⁷⁶ Nzula et al. *Forced labour in colonial Africa*, 106.

⁷⁷ A. N. Y., A. P. A. 11229/D, *Manifestations anti-françaises d'indigènes*, juill. 1940, police et santé 441.

⁷⁸ Maul, "The International Labour Organisation," 480.

norms.⁷⁹ This means that the norms as shall be seen subsequently were problematic when it came to precision. This lack of precision put the colonial administration and the local population apart on matters related to the organization and recruitment of labour in the entire territory. For instance, in a letter addressed to Gaston Camille, the Commissioner (Commissaire de la Republique) of the French Cameroons the chief and representative of the Mungo region in 1937 pleaded that the Commissaire should try to revise the administration's labour recruitment laws which had led to the mass exodus, suffering and depopulation of his area.⁸⁰ It is interesting to know that by the time this reaction and others coming from the local population, France had not still ratified the 1930 Convention. This instance and others elsewhere in and out of the French Cameroons seemed to have pushed the French colonial administration to make a slight amelioration of her forced labour regulations. Despite the ratification, France still insisted some "forms of forced or obligatory labour whose maintenance are currently indispensable to the material and social progress of the populations of the colonies" should be kept intact.⁸¹ From this declaration, reference was being made to the *deuxième portion, prestations*, and forced cultivation for instruction or experimentation in agricultural techniques, all of which were consistent with the ILO's intention of moving progressively towards the elimination of forced labour.⁸²

This in essence indicates France's position when it came to the adoption of conventions within the ILO. By carrying on with *deuxième portion, prestations* and to an extent imposing the cultivation of certain crops by the local population the French colonial administration was contributing in weakening the ILO conventions. On the other hand, Britain by this time was up-to-date with the ratification of ILO conventions and was working toward ending labour practices condemned by the ILO.

2.2.3 Convention 65 of 1939

This was one of the main initiatives by the ILO during this period aimed at stamping out forced labour in all its forms and clearing off some of the misinterpretations which the earlier resolutions and conventions had failed to make precision on. As it reads in its Article 2,

⁷⁹ Maul, "The International Labour Organization," 481.

⁸⁰ A. N. Y., A. P. A 11797/B. Lettre du chef de la region du Mungo au Commissaire de la Republique, 1er mars 1937.

⁸¹ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 91.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 91.

1. All penal sanctions for any breach of contract to which this Convention applies shall be abolished progressively and as soon as possible.
2. All penal sanctions for any such breach by a non-adult person whose apparent age is less than a minimum age to be prescribed by law or regulations shall be abolished immediately.⁸³

It is important to note that the prevailing situation this time was the partial application of most of the ILO conventions mainly because of the fact that some colonial powers either decided to give different interpretations to the conventions or merely refused to ratify them so as to prevent mass international condemnation. This was with the case of the Slavery Convention and the Convention No.29. The main point of interest for the colonial powers this time seemed to be on how to protect their economic interests in their colonies since the economic situation in the colonies was so crucial during and after the Second World War. For instance, French opposition to ILO conventions and labour regulations was stronger than that of the British, Belgians and even Portuguese. France wanted to carve a world of its own free from ILO influences where she would design her own international labour policies [international in the sense of her two main federations, the French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa]. Therefore, the Dutch, the Belgians and Portuguese were placed in a position where they could hardly be critical of colonial labour policies since their own labour policies were not very different from those of the French.

The US which immediately after World War 1 in order to limit her participation in other world issues decided to pursue the policy of Isolationism. The US moral backing of the course of the colonial inhabitants was quite evident. This was proven during the period leading to the creation of the League of Nations especially in the Wilsonian years. Her joining of the ILO in 1934 would also be determinant in ensuring that the colonial powers put in place acceptable labour standards in the colonies.

As has been mentioned in previous sections, the ILO even though wanted to see the labour situation in the colonies ameliorated, there was still a lack of consensus between the major actors and the colonial powers. This led to most of the conventions either partially

⁸³ ILO, *C65 Penal Sanctions (indigenous workers) Convention, 1939 [Convention Concerning Penal Sanctions for Breaches of Contracts of employment by indigenous workers]*, Geneva, Director-General of the International Labour Organization, 1939, 1.

implemented, rejected, misinterpreted to suit the specific colonial governments' agenda or simply neglected. This point is evident as -Maul states,

From the onset, however, the colonial powers were reluctant to commit themselves to this norm. As a result, all the ILO's attempts during and after the war to persuade more countries to ratify it had been in vain.⁸⁴

Keeping aside the reluctance of the major colonial powers especially France' reluctance to ratify the convention, this very phrase in the Convention, "... progressive abolition" still seemed ambiguous and somehow vague since no time frame was set for the abolition. Like in the previous conventions, this convention seemed to have followed the same path of not being clear. The colonial powers would exploit this in order to find a reason for either continuing with penal sanctions or delay in its ratification. France for instance would drag this issue even up to the late 1950s.

Generally, this lack of clarity in most of the ILO's resolutions would engender an atmosphere of double standards on the part of the colonial powers.⁸⁵ The fact that within the ILO as seen in the various conventions and recommendations, members agreed on the pressing need to end forced labour and penal sanctions against employees in the colonies was a sign of strong commitment as a whole. Yet countries like France, Belgium and Portugal were reluctant in applying the resolutions agreed upon which shows a continued circle of double standards. On how to overcome this, it seems being clear and precise on certain resolutions would leave no room for different interpretations thereby committing the colonial powers to apply the resolutions in their respective colonies.

⁸⁴ Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 192.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

It is important to set into perspective some of the interpretations the colonial powers based most of their arguments on:

A ‘colonial clause’ in the organization’s [the League of Nations] constitution of 1919 which granted the metropolitan powers the right to exclude, in part or entirely, their overseas territories from the ratification of norms made it difficult to apply ILO standards in colonial territories. In addition the colonial powers on their part were fiercely against a regular norm applying to the colonial areas because they feared that a document that regardless of the ‘colonial clause’ addressed both the colonies and mother countries in its provisions could be interpreted as a signal that conditions in the metropolis and the periphery were actually to be measured with the same yardstick, an impression that the colonial powers wanted at all cost to avoid.⁸⁶

In fact, this may be one of the major lapses of the international system in its resolve to end forced labour definitely. In other words, even if the ILO found colonial regimes and administrations wanting, intervention on its part would have been hindered by the ‘colonial clause.’ Just as this clause prevented the organization from acting as a check on excesses, it gave the colonial powers a leeway to ignore the ILO as an international norm setter in labour matters. This happened to be one of the areas where the work of the ILO was made difficult.

2.3 Why the labour question still remained a preoccupation in the French Cameroons despite the ILO’s resolve

The will to end forced labour, to foster conciliation procedures, and to make work organization more efficient did not mean that such tasks would get done. Indeed, old ways of doing things had created subtle relations of power that were hard to see, let alone to change.⁸⁷

Talking about the persistence of the labour question in the French Cameroons, one needs to first of all look at the broader picture especially the international circumstances during this period. The major powers at least in the colonies began to look at the economic situation of

⁸⁶ Maul, “The International Labour Organization,” 480-481.

⁸⁷ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 109.

their colonies differently. This was a period when the momentum for colonial reform grew, with the major powers foreseeing an economic hardship without the full support from their colonies. Within the ILO, this organization had adopted conventions which to an extent prevented member countries especially those that had ratified these conventions to end forced labour and other forms of labour which were not in consonance with international labour standards. Yet, the question remained, colonial inhabitants continued to work against their will, they continued to experience practices which the ILO through its resolutions had condemned thereby committing the colonial powers to protect the labour rights of the colonial inhabitants.

The League of Nations had defined in its Article 33 instances where labour could be termed forced labour. It stated, “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.” It went further to stress that such labour could be used but temporarily “as an exceptional measure” for the purposes of public works.⁸⁸ Looking at the entire Article 33, it seemed inasmuch as it spelled out instances which could lead to forced labour, there seemed to be lack of clarity especially as on the same Article military service and minor communal services were exempted. This shows how the forced labour regulations themselves were not clear in their definition of situations and instances where labour could be extracted. The French colonial government seemed to have exploited this situation in order to carry out their own policies in their colonies. In the French Cameroons, the situation was translated through the organization of labour recruitment processes which could either be classified under public works initiatives or correction for minor moral offenses. In a report presented by one of the local traditional rulers in the Bafang area in the western part of the French Cameroons, he made mention of lawlessness which characterized the labour recruitment process even in the late 1930s.⁸⁹ His remarks indicate that he had an idea of what was going on at the international scene when it comes to the various ILO conventions.

As has been seen in previous discussions, the internal disagreement within the ILO happens to have been one of the reasons for which the labour question dragged on for some time. There was lack of a unified stance and a concerted effort from all major members of the organization. Asian officials were most vocal critics of what they termed the ILO’s

⁸⁸ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 29.

⁸⁹ Archive Nationale Yaoundé (ANY), Affaires Politique et Administratives (APA) 11820/B. Rapport administrative du chef de la subdivision de Bafang, Septembre 1937.

excessively cautious attitude to colonial issues.⁹⁰ Despite the heavy criticism of the organization by this group of representatives, most of the ills they condemned seemed to have had little or no impact since this group lacked the political and economic weight needed to stir things up in an organization of this magnitude. Most of them were still struggling to find a foot in the international system since they either had just attained nationhood or were about to. Also, the United States' anti-colonial campaign for some time happened to be a boost to the Asian group. This might have been short-lived at least in the more open and aggressive manner as Cold War politics made things work in favour of the Western colonial powers. As the Cold War intensified, it became difficult for the US to exert pressure on the colonial powers.⁹¹

This shows that the lack of consensus within this organization highly impacted on the implementation of the resolutions, recommendations and conventions that would have helped to ameliorate labour standards.

In fact, Cooper notes that this kind of super-power politics and disagreement affected almost all major international organizations during this period. The League of Nations provided a forum in which the conduct of colonial powers could at times be examined, but it left the judgement of what to do to those powers themselves.⁹² This is just exactly what was going on within the ILO which made the labour question to persist.

The issue of non-ratification or delay in the ratification of most of the major conventions had made it difficult for an international concerted effort to end forced labour. Right from the passing of the Forced Labour Convention of 1930 the French, Belgian and Portuguese opposition seemed indicative of how its application in their respective colonies would look like. For instance, even though divided, the French delegation (the French government and employer representatives) during the ILO conference of 1930 supported the idea that there should not be a ban on forced labour for private purposes as opposed to their counterparts- the representatives of French workers.⁹³ The French government being the overall voice during this conference finally forced its stance through. With the overall Convention being to the disfavour of the French, they delayed the ratification of the Convention No.29 up to 1937 when they finally signed it. But before and after the ratification of this Convention, the French

⁹⁰ Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 87.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁹² Cooper, "Reconstructing empire," 198.

⁹³ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 29.

colonial administration in the French Cameroons just like in other French colonies would carry out labour policies which contravened the ILO standards.

Internal politics within the ILO did not end just at the global level. In the local French Cameroons context, the colonial administration kept on with the policy of *deuxième portion du contingent* for instance between 1922 to 1936, the administration depended much on this and other recruitment channels to get the manpower required for most public works and at time private use.⁹⁴ The *deuxième portion* was a metaphor, an attempt to create an association of compulsory public works labour with military duty.⁹⁵ As has been earlier seen, this was in most cases composed of those who were deemed unfit to perform the real military task and consequently were used as labourers for public projects. In the French Cameroons, the French colonial administration applied this policy to obtain labour for the construction of public projects and in the agricultural sector.

Labour recruitment in emergency situations kept on being applied differently in the French Cameroons as one could hardly distinguish between recruitment undertaken as a response to an emergency and that undertaken during normal times.⁹⁶ This was a common routine in particularly those administrative departments *Circumscriptions* where the railway passed through or where major roads were constructed.

It has been seen above how the ILO from the 1920s up to late 1930s, prided itself as the international norm setter of issues related to world labour. In as much as it had the legal instruments to go and condemn the colonial powers who had benefited from the lapses of most of the conventions, the ILO still needed to be specific. In the face of these excesses, the ILO's legal instruments were rather weak owing to their lack of clarity. Most of the resolutions and Conventions were not so clear which opened the way for the colonial administrations to easily violate them. For instance, even up to 1939, Article 2 (i) Convention 65 still called on the "progressive abolition" of forced labour.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, as early as 1930 with the adoption of the Forced Labour Convention, the ILO managed to exert pressure on colonial powers but again found itself in a position of weakness as in its final resolution, it committed the signatory to "suppress the use of forced or compulsory labour in all its forms within the shortest possible time." It then offered a five-year transitional period during which colonial

⁹⁴ A.N.Y., A.P.A 11819, *Charles Atangana et le chef de la region de Nyong et Sanaga*, 23 Août 1948.

⁹⁵ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 38.

⁹⁶ A.N.Y., A.P.A 11819, *Charles Atangana et le chef de la region de Nyong et Sanaga*, 23 Août 1948.

⁹⁷ ILO, "C65 penal," 1.

powers could use forced labour for public purposes and in exceptional cases.⁹⁸ Just like in the previous case discussed earlier, the ILO in this case opened an opportunity for the colonial governments to ignore the application of the convention. The gradual process in tackling the labour issue by this organization one of the reasons for the long standing labour question. In line with this, Bellucci and Eckert state,

The ability of the ILO to influence conditions within colonies, however, reflected the influence of imperial powers on the Governing Body of the ILO and the institution's general lack of enforcement capacity. Article 35 of the ILO's original constitution was framed within these tensions and thus provided signatories with wide latitude of action regarding the implementation of ILO regulations and conventions. Members of the ILO 'undertook to apply' the conventions that they signed, and that were designed for metropolitan contexts.⁹⁹

This is indicative of lapses which existed within the ILO. The power of every organization to enforce its regulation usually emanates from its members. In this case, the very members who would have had the enforcement capacity tended to be those who either ignored the convention or violated the conventions.

⁹⁸ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 80.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

3 POST-1944 LABOUR SITUATION AND CONTINUITIES IN THE LABOUR QUESTION

The year 1944 was quite significant for the ILO in the struggle to reform labour standards globally. Within the French colonial empire and especially within the French federations in black Africa, there was a considerable advancement in the handling of the labour question. Also, dynamics within the labour question in French Africa seemed to have been more complicated as the issue of a single labour code for both French citizens in the metropole and those in the overseas territories became highly contested. Again, this year seemed to be a turning point in the struggle to reform colonial labour given the enthusiasm and commitment in the resolutions that were produced after the Philadelphia and Brazzaville Conferences.

While the Philadelphia Conference of 1944 falls within the framework of an ILO initiative to encourage social justice, raise labour standards and to bring about the final end of forced labour, the Brazzaville Conference was first conceived as a political galvanizer. This was because it was first conceived as a rallying call from the Free French Movement of Charles de Gaulle the Vichy puppet government under Marshal Philippe Pétain. Therefore, at the end of this conference the recommendations largely dealt on labour issues and the conditions under which French sub-Saharan colonies were working.

The concept of competing universalism is once more seen during this period with the organization of two parallel conferences (Bazzaville and Philadelphia) on the labour question with both the ILO and the French government struggling to appropriate the main narrative. But the beginning and intensification of the Cold War even makes this more evident seen in the ideological differences between the US and the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁰ This tussle will be seen in the whole of later colonial period as during the 1950s, the French together with the British were keen to present themselves as champions of good labour standards overseas.¹⁰¹ These international conferences organized within the framework of labour reform took place within a relatively short interval. These conferences became quite symbolic through their resolutions

¹⁰⁰ Amrith and Sluga, "New Histories," 259.

¹⁰¹ Keese, Alexander. "Slow abolition within the colonial minds: British and French debates about "Vagrancy", "African laziness", and forced labour in West Central and South Central Africa, 1945-1965." *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 378.

which had an impact on the labour question. The ILO as the international organization directly concerned with labour matters around the world during this period would try to adapt to the fast-changing geopolitical map of the world through the inclusion of issues that had previously not been within its realms, that is the social dimension of the labour question.¹⁰²

This was also a period when the liberal economic model advocated by most Western colonial governments which had gotten a foothold from the 1920s to the 1930s began to face serious challenges from the colonies and from the ILO. This was because of the changes that were ongoing within the organization which necessitated more internal scrutiny. This to an extent had an impact on the labour question as political and civil rights became mutually reinforcing conditions for the achievement of economic and social progress.¹⁰³ On the other hand, there were traits of Soviet Communist policies which affected the way labour unions dealt with the colonial governments. The successful organization of the Asian-African Conference in 1955 in Bandung would equally contribute in shaping the minds of nationalists, trade union leaders and the labour question during this period.

As has been mentioned in the previous chapters, this was a period when the East-West ideological conflict was becoming more intense. This affected the treatment of the labour question in countries and colonies within these blocs and globally. The rivalry between the Eastern and Western bloc had reached the labour front with each strategizing and formulating policies to dominate the other.

Another striking thing which characterized this period was a struggle by the Third World including many African countries to be a contender within the international human rights project. It is for this reason that the first director of the Human Rights Division would be surprised at the rise of a confident group of Arab and Asian delegates. He would declare that “the ‘backward’ countries are in revolt.”¹⁰⁴ This was indirectly linked to what was ongoing within the ILO in that it was now that this organization which had previously concentrated on strictly labour matters decided to extend its borders to include elements of social and human rights. Colonization in itself was as a regime which bore traits of human rights violations through the non-extension of equal labour standards and rights to the colonial world. Colonization also infringed on the rights to self-determination. Therefore, inasmuch as there

¹⁰² Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 59.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁰⁴ Burke, *Decolonization and International Human Rights*, 2.

was a projection of force by the Third World, one can still relate the human rights debate to the main theory of this work from the way France again would try to spearhead the human rights debate. The French René Cassin one of the main authors of the UDHR strongly opposed the right to self-determination which constituted human rights later contradicted himself by saying that colonial inhabitants could enjoy essential political rights and fundamental freedoms within the colonial regime.¹⁰⁵ As a whole, what were some of the main changes in the labour question which came as a product of the major conferences of 1944? How did these affect labour specifically in the colonies? How was this felt at the local level within the French Cameroons setting? This chapter focuses on the outcome of the two major international conferences and other international events directly linked to the labour question.

3.1 Main international conferences in the early 1940s and the labour question

The Second World War had made the Western powers, and particularly colonial powers, to discover that Africa could play even a greater role in the international scene particularly in world economy. It produced primary products which fed industries in Europe and other parts of the world. The same war led to further exploitation and worsening living conditions for African workers. These were not good signs for the colonial world at large. This made the colonial powers and the international community to begin thinking about altering some main regulations to govern colonial labour. In 1944, two major international conferences were organized to address the degrading labour situation in the world and in Africa. Both the Brazzaville and Philadelphia conferences touched on issues which were intended to ameliorate labour conditions. The French colonial administration and experts who met in Philadelphia tried to alter previous legislations on international labour standards. After these conferences, new regulations on labour were adopted which had an impact on labour recruitment, the treatment of employees and others. It is necessary to present these conferences and then highlight some of their major outcomes with regard to the labour question.

¹⁰⁵ Burke, *Decolonization and International Human rights*, 37.

3.1.1 The Brazzaville Conference of 1944

Set within a colonial context, the Brazzaville Conference which took place from January to February 1944 brought together de Gaulle's Free French faction and her colonial empire in black Africa. In fact, this conference also had as its main objective the unity and continuity of the French empire in Africa.¹⁰⁶ This would be reflected in the declarations of de Gaulle during the conference and in the conference's final resolutions. The continuity of the French colonial empire was not something that was opened for any negotiations. The war had proven the value of the empire to France, and France's post-war recovery required both an efficient empire and one whose legitimacy was secure.¹⁰⁷ The impact of the contribution of the colonial empire was felt significantly during the war in terms of man power and other war efforts. If de Gaulle was able to overpower the Vichy regime, it was thanks to the contribution and loyalty of most of the French overseas possessions especially her African colonies. It was in this light that the *Commissariat*, led by Plevin – a highly regarded *resistant* and Gaullist – laid plans for a conference of officials with African experience to be held at Brazzaville, in French Equatorial Africa at the beginning of 1944.¹⁰⁸ This means that the conference's aims apart from what the organizers had put out was an opportunity to sink the difference between pro-Gaullists and pro-Vichy factions in and out of Africa thereby making collaboration, unity and continued working relationship between the colonies and the French metropole easier. This would be achieved through an atmosphere of dialogue, the making of some concessions and acknowledgement of mutual help between France and her colonies. Critics of this conference later saw it as a double-edged sword.

At the end of this conference, the Brazzaville Declaration was issued which contained some important resolutions. The Declaration touched on several aspects from social, human rights, political and economic domains. With regard to what was directly related to labour and some of the pressing needs of employees at that time, the French colonial administration decided to make concessions which they perceived as fair and responsive to the main challenges of the post-war period. They were,

- The introduction of new economic reforms aimed at preventing the exploitation of Africans in the labour market.

¹⁰⁶ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 177.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

- The abolition of most discriminatory laws for instance the *Indigénat* and *Prestation* which had proven to be fertile avenues for forced labour recruitment including the *Deuxième portion du contingent*.
- The concept of “Native labour” was abolished in favour of a situation where Africans were able to commodify their labour.

The French colonial empire would remain united with the French metropole. This was later popularized with the concept of *l’indivisibilité de l’empire colonial français* (the indivisibility of the French colonial empire). In fact, the most progressive implications of the Brazzaville doctrines precisely from its most “imperial” position that the unity and continuity of the French empire must remain unquestioned.¹⁰⁹

- Equality of rights between citizens within the French colonial empire and those at the metropole.
- It still put emphasis on the progressive implementation of the resolutions. This means that the resolutions were not implemented immediately.

Critics of this conference have cast doubts to the degree of sincerity of the French colonial administration and the conferees. This was because the conference exposed the French colonial administration’s hypocrisy to a large extent if one examines closely what happened after. The conference still did not make most Africans to feel represented in the governance of the empire partly because of obstructions from some assimilation clauses. The Subject and Citizen divide still remained. Representation at this crucial moment went above just the political aspect as it also meant improvement in the labour conditions. The conferees would not break with the past division of labour, under which Africans produced primary products, the French industrial goods.¹¹⁰ The issue of continuities in forced labour was still not resolved as there would be simply a change in the method in which forced labour was organized. For instance, the concept of ‘the state of emergency’ would be used to recruit forced labour. This issue will be discussed in detail later.

There seemed to be a mere change of terminology with a blend of the time factor. This was because by introducing the clause on the progressive implementation of most of the

¹⁰⁹ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 178.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

recommendations, the French colonial administration knew this would buy more time and make them carry on with their old ways. In general, the content of the policies or their application remained almost the same. Cooper observes that during this conference, Latrille who knew perfectly well that the past fifty years had done the trick, proposed taking another five years in the process. During this period, issues to phase out would include forced recruitment, reducing the numbers recruited by 50 percent annually until the final year, with *obligation au travail* replacing *travail obligatoire* (obligation/rigour at work replacing mandatory/forced labour), now in the form of one year's public service. The final resolution, following Latrille, proclaimed the "absolute superiority of free labour" but phased out recruitment over five years and called for the creation of "*un service obligatoire du travail*" to do work in the public interest.¹¹¹ This is just one of the instances where the colonial administration played with words just to maintain the same content of previous labour regulations. This is because following this new labour code, forced labour was officially abolished but the colonial inhabitants were still expected to offer mandatory public service to the colonial administration. This implies that communal public service still remained mandatory and not a free will something.

Indigénat was officially abolished and the 22nd December 1945 Decrees and that of 20th February 1946 abolished the system of penalties that had been a centerpiece of the *Code de l'indigénat*.¹¹² There was the revision of the labour code. This was followed by the harmonization of the labour code which eliminated the differences that existed between France and her overseas empire and further among colonies within the empire. This harmonization was seen as a partial solution to the labour question because workers were still discriminated upon based on their citizenship status. There still existed disparities between évolués (those that had advanced in French culture and citizens) and the French subjects. Even when it became clear that workers could commodify their labour, the issue of equality of standards still posed a problem.

The Brazzaville Conference of 1944 stands out to be one of those instances where one finds the universalism theory confirmed. The concept of competing universalism is seen through the claims and actions of France in her struggle to unify the colonial empire. In so doing, she wanted to use the conference as a bigger and representative bloc with a larger audience made

¹¹¹ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 179.

¹¹² Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 109.

up of countries with a structured standard. At the conference, the French colonial empire prevented any attempt of its dissolution and insisted on its indivisibility. There was an implicit universalism in such a claim, and however much officials resisted this implication in any domain, French society itself set the model for its empire, and France anxious to convince itself and the world that French imperialism was progressive – set itself the task of living up to its own standards.¹¹³ With the organization of the Philadelphia Conference and the proclamation of the Philadelphia Declaration, one is able to see this concept of competing universalism. France through the Brazzaville Declaration and a more representative and enlarged group of experts who met at Philadelphia was already indicative this time around that between France and the ILO, the ILO was calling the shots in French overseas territories when it comes to controlling labour standards.

3.1.2 The Philadelphia Conference of 1944

As for the ILO, a new world was being created and it would have to move to areas that had previously been out of its reach if it had to make a place for itself.¹¹⁴ It is also important to situate this period within the context particularly in the history of the quest by colonial inhabitants to stamp out the major traces of colonialism. This was when the colonial world began to intensify the quest for a just treatment within the international system. Through its participation in World War 1 and now the Second World War, the colonial world now saw the need to alter the status quo. Within the ILO, Wilfrid Beson, a junior official of the International Labour Office occupied colonial labour, was tasked to draw up an important and decisive document which in its universalistic language called for active development which represented an almost total break with the organization's "native labour" work in the period before the war. One of the most crucial issues in the labour question during this period happened to be native labour which at last had drawn the attention of international audience through Benson. Recruited into the ILO since 1921, he had served in different departments until his appointment to head the Native Labour Division of the ILO. Maul captures the particularity of Benson's major achievement within the ILO as he states,

Benson's plan for a "people's peace in the colonies" was a document which, in its universalistic language and calls for active development, represented an almost total

¹¹³ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 178.

¹¹⁴ Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 59.

break with the organization's "native labour" work in the period before the war. Its adoption at the Philadelphia Conference, where the ILO proclaimed universal social rights and convincingly claimed for itself a role in structuring the post-war order, was a milestone in the treatment of colonial social policy on an international level.¹¹⁵

This means that in Benson, there were elements of a reformed colonial labour policy where labourers in the colonies would be able to join the community of labourers all over the world with nearly the same standards. This period equally marked the beginning of a new commitment by the ILO in improving the labour situation in the colonies. Just as it signals the ILO's determination in improving the labour condition, it also made the colonial powers to be more committed in uplifting social and economic standards in their various colonies. With the main catalyst being the Second World War, the ILO in its hallmark Declaration of Philadelphia of 1944 stressed on social and economic post-war planning based on the idea of universal social rights. Parallel to the Declaration of Philadelphia, the ILO promoted a programme of colonial reform under the programmatic title of 'social policy in dependent territories'. This programme became the basis for a series of recommendations and conventions to be adopted between 1944 and 1948, which committed colonial powers to developing their territories in line with a broad social objective.¹¹⁶ The idea of economic and social planning for the colonies and the commitment of the colonial powers to accelerate things appeared reasonable given the global trend of this period characterized by issues connected to reconstruction, development, social cohesion and human rights.

Looking closely at this initiative, one could already foresee some limitations. First, it was integrated into the grand universalistic programme. This meant that at the global level, it could easily be drowned by other more pressing programmes and initiatives. Even if this initiative attracted world attention, it could easily be derailed by colonial powers whose interests were at stake. Secondly, there seemed to be no serious mechanisms to put pressure on the colonial regime in Africa for the application of the conventions. This was reflected in the ILO's gradual and qualified universalism as the colonial powers successfully resisted the full application of the International Labour Code in the colonies.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Maul, *Human Rights, Development*, 59.

¹¹⁶ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 231.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

Also, the prevailing circumstances at this point were that the organization faced problems with the coordination of its activities to an extent. It is important to note that following the German invasion of France in 1940, the ILO in Geneva had been forced into exile.¹¹⁸ The organization was now relocated to Canada. This made most of its staff and other operations to face some minor setbacks in relation to coordination of projects.

The year 1944 remains a decisive one in the struggle to reform the labour situation in the world and in the colonies in particular. As has been seen, two major conferences were organized with major objectives to address the situation in the colonies amongst others. These international conferences in two independent settings and contexts all deliberated on the labour question and at the end adopted resolutions independent of each other. Even though other international conventions on the labour issue continued to be adopted after 1945, the Brazzaville and Philadelphia Conferences were some sort of foundations or reference points upon which labour reforms as from the 1940s were laid.

The Brazzaville Conference for instance altered the labour question narrative in the French colonial empire in Africa. Even though its resolutions and their application in the colonies have been much debated, it opened the way for a softer handling of labour matters in the later years within the colonial context. France within the frameworks of the Brazzaville Conference showed the desire to move with the times in terms of the changes that were going on globally with regard to labour.

In addition to the Philadelphia Conference which was an international gathering initiated by the ILO and the Brazzaville Conference which was more of an internal come together for France and her colonies in Black Africa, the ideas contained in Benson's article published in 1943 were so pragmatic. It was an appeal on the consciences of colonial governments to reform their policies in the colonies. It was a call for justice, equality in dealing with and treatment of colonial inhabitants, freedom of labour unions and above all, a call for the colonial world to be included in an overall global programme of social reform based on the idea of universal social rights.¹¹⁹ In the later years, all these happenings helped in shaping the labour question in the colonies. Even though many of the declarations and demands were never met immediately, there was a renewed interest globally about colonial affairs. More of such gains for the plight of the colonial inhabitants were made under the new Director-

¹¹⁸ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 231

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

General David Morse. Under him, instead of the attention being focused on international conferences in Europe, there was a shift of field of activities to Africa. Between 1947 and 1959, the ILO advocacy for the course of colonial inhabitants in Africa had moved from the Committee of experts in Social Policy in Non-Metropolitan Territories (COESP) to the African Advisory Committee. These bodies contributed enormously in charting the course for the African labour situation.¹²⁰

3.2 Continuities in the labour question after 1944

One of the remarkable signs during this period was a successful challenge of French forced labour policies by Africans. Empowered by both the Brazzaville Declaration and the Philadelphia Declaration, labourers and labour unions in the colonies began to press for a reformed labour policy. This opposition from Africans would now make the French colonial administration to refocus their attention on other areas which cropped up. These included their endeavour to prevent or end strikes, the control of trade union movements, family benefits, the stabilization of an elite of free industrial labourers, public sector employees and others.¹²¹ The French colonial administration increasingly understood that if they did not redefine the concept of citizenship for inhabitants of the colonial empire, they could be placed in a position where they would be completely irrelevant for the people which would make them face so much pressure from within and out of the empire. For this reason, the French ministry of the French overseas empire decided in 1946 to abandon most of its projects for legislation which were mainly centered on citizenship including a separate labour code for the indigenes.¹²² This meant that matters relating to citizenship largely affected economic and social life in the colonies since this went alongside regulations which discriminated between citizens and non-citizens. Both the old and new terminologies for forced labour applied mainly to indigenes or non-citizens.

Another important aspect during this period was the balkanization of the French colonial empire in Africa. Nation-states emerged from the two main federations that had existed. This would have an impact on the labour question within the colonies. It would be easier for the de Gaulle's Free French Movement to overcome the Vichy faction. Coordination among the

¹²⁰ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 241.

¹²¹ Keese, "Slow Abolition," 383.

¹²² Cooper Frederick. *Citizenship between empire and nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960*. (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2014), 125.

African political elite and the working class would be made even more difficult under de Gaulle's France.

There were glaring signs in the post-1944 era that forced labour was still ongoing. France for instance was still able to evade the application of most of the ILO conventions on forced labour. By 1957, only the technical terms of ratification appeared to pose some difficulties (mainly for the French), while questions of labour abuses organized or tolerated by the state were only mentioned in other contexts in particular when "Western" governments accused the Soviet Union of abuses.¹²³ Therefore, French colonial policy was an implicit aspect of continuity in the labour question.

International pressure and the intensification of calls by the ILO for a reformed labour policy in the colonies seems to be evident of the fact that all was not well and much needed to be done to address the labour situation. Even with the abolition of more open forms of forced labour by the colonial governments after 1945, a number of circumstances existed on which they could rely to justify continuities in compulsory practices. The first was the element of "traditional labour" much cherished by the British, the abolition of labour practices in the local context was said to be contrary to "native customs."¹²⁴ This concept was often employed by the French in order to cover up for the continuous practice of forced labour in the colonies. The second was "emergency situations", in which it seemed still to be acceptable to make African subjects work even if it was against their will.¹²⁵ During World War II, the whole colonial economy in the French and British empires in sub-Saharan Africa had been conditioned by an emergency situation, which was used as an excuse to introduce harsh forms of compulsory labour and extract resources from African territories. After 1945, this instrument was played less openly, but it continued to be important on several occasions, and could be relied upon in flexible and artificial ways.¹²⁶ This was a term mostly used by the French colonial administration since the concept of emergency situation had not been well defined.

A third mechanism that was employed to disguise continuities in forced labour practices was the use of vagrancy legislations. Like the concept of emergency, the idea of "vagrancy", linked to other racist stereotypes of "idle" Africans, was very flexible and adaptable. It relied

¹²³ Keese, "Slow Abolition," 378.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 384.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 384.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 384.

on a longstanding “tradition” of criminalizing “laziness” which had been used widely in early modern Europe, and it was connected to such concepts as begging, prostitution, and other “immoral acts”, and could be punished with hard labour. While in the inter-war period, compulsory labour for “vagrants” had been used as complementary to other forms of colonial forced labour, it now became possible to inflict unfree labour as punishment for criminal and immoral acts, detached from other forms of forced labour that were no longer endorsed by colonial ministries.¹²⁷ These were minor instances which were transformed to major acts or crimes against the colonial administration. For instance, in a correspondence to the state prosecutor of the Douala administrative region, E. Gallard in 1946 that is 2 years after the Brazzaville Conference reminded the inspector of administrative matters of the 2 civil codes (one for Europeans and the other for indigenes) which were supposed to be applied.¹²⁸ It is rather surprising to note that an international conference organized 2 years ago which put to an end most discriminatory laws and though it made mention of progressive elimination of these laws. Two years after, everything seemed to be still intact.

To justify the compulsion to labour, which resembled slavery, colonial officials argued that coercion was necessary to overcome Africans’ inherent ‘inertia and laziness’ by claiming that such obligatory labour was ‘educational’. Throughout Africa, legal distinctions separated citizens from subjects.¹²⁹ This made those considered as subjects to be subjected to coercive legal regimes. Such was common in French Africa where the French *Code de l’indigénat* put African subjects under the control of colonial officials where they were subject to punishment for minor offenses including obligatory labour.¹³⁰ This was similar to the *impoto indigénat* in the Portuguese colonies.

Cooper states that in the case of French empire in sub-Saharan Africa, the end of compulsory labour has been presented erroneously as a clear-cut, unambiguous termination of the practice. This was because in 1945, two labour codes were issued for white and European workers.¹³¹ This seemed to have been one of the main causes of the Dakar labour strike of 1946. For French colonial planners, the context after World War II seemed to be a period when a number of concessions needed to be made in the African continent. Through a fundamental report of African representation in French institutions, notably in the National

¹²⁷ Keese, *Slow Abolition*, 384.

¹²⁸ ANY, 1AC 344, Justice, “*Lettre à Monsieur L’inspecteur des Affaires Administratives.*” 20 Fevrier 1946.

¹²⁹ Chafer, *The end of empire*, 95.

¹³⁰ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 84.

¹³¹ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 277.

Assembly, French politicians had brought a small group of Africans into parliament that would function as a very vocal group opposing various elements of social discrimination against colonial subjects. In the aftermath of World War II, compulsory labour was probably the most contested of these elements.¹³² This may have been probably because of the adoption of new terms to refer to labour organized by the French colonial authorities this time. It seemed a surprise for many that the French colonial administration in both of its federations was clear of the accusations of forced labour by the Mudaliar Committee when it delivered its final report in 1953. The Mudaliar Committee was UN and ILO ad hoc committee headed by an Indian diplomat and legal expert called Ramaswami Mudaliar whose careful study of the actual situation on the ground presented a report which gave an idea on the real motives behind the practice of corrective and coerced labour.¹³³ As has been presented in previous discussions, the very concept of *travaux publiques* (communal labour) commonly used to refer to labour organized by the colonial government and the role of local chiefs who still found it hard to desist from the lucrative business of organizing and recruiting local inhabitants for both public and individual work. This was a common practice even up to this period which needed to have attracted the attention of the Mudaliar Committee.

Furthermore, one of the agents which kept the practice of forced labour alive in the French Cameroons were the local chief. Their role in ensuring a permanent link between the colonial administration and the local population was not still disrupted in the post-World War II era. This continued relationship and role played by the traditional rulers led to a multiplicity of violent confrontations between the colonial administration and the Betis, Etons and other populations groups where their chiefs still collaborated with the colonial representative in the *Yaounde Circumscription* to make them work against their will.¹³⁴

In 1949, the French Inspector-General of Labour of French West Africa, Pierre Pélisson, gave a damning account of the situation of rural labour in the federation: the “natives” were said to evade their obligations and show little respect for their contracts. This was regarded as an immense problem.¹³⁵ Meanwhile, the Houphouet Boigny law had forbidden the use of emergency labour. Being a French subject within the federations meant that individuals were subject to “state of emergency” or emergency situation form of labour recruitment, a situation

¹³² Keese, “Slow Abolition,” 385.

¹³³ Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 205.

¹³⁴ Guyer, Jane I. “The depression and the administration in South-Centre Cameroon.” *African Economic History* 10 (1981) 76.

¹³⁵ Keese, *Slow Abolition*, 385.

which made the colonial authorities to arbitrarily recruit labour. The situation continued despite the enactment of the Houphouet Boigny law of 1946 and all other ILO conventions which prohibited this method of labour recruitment. Just like in other French colonies in the two French colonial federations, labour continued to be recruited arbitrarily using the emergency situation clause. In the French Cameroons, villagers and other inhabitants mostly of settlements which were located along areas through which the railway passed had to devise a strategy of evading recruitments during the so-called emergencies. They had to declare ages which were far below their real ages. In a circular dated 14th January 1954 from the High Commissioner of the French Cameroons addressed to the Regional Heads, Sub divisional Heads and Heads of Courts, he made the population to understand that he was aware of these tricks.¹³⁶ (see appendix 1, page 60).

It becomes more interesting to see how the French colonial administration and the local labour unions managed to juggle with the labour question during this period. After the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 French citizens of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa witnessed an amelioration of their conditions in terms of how they were treated. This covered economic, social and political life of the inhabitants. To be more specific, with the adoption of a new labour code for these federations and the French colonial empire at large, France seemed to have been caught in her own trap in the colonies. This was because citizens in the colonies from now henceforth would wish to have the same level with their counterparts in the French metropole. The colonial inhabitants had hoped that the new labour code would automatically translate to a uniform application of a single labour code for the French citizens be they those in the metropole or those residing in the French overseas territories. This was not the case as French citizens in the metropole were treated differently. In the Dakar-Niger railway project, it led to the 1947-8 railway strike. In the French Cameroons, this also fueled the strikes mainly in the chief coastal towns of Douala, Kribi and along the stretches where rail lines passed through. These were areas which factories, warehouses, workshops and other small processing industries were usually located. This is one of the many isolated cases which erupted as a result of the labour question in the post-

¹³⁶ ANY, 1AC 344, Justice, "Circulaire: le Haut Commissaire de la Republique Française au Cameroun à messieurs les chefsde Region et de Subdivision, messieurs les presidents des tribunaux du 1er degré, 14th January 1954.

World War II era. The representatives of European (French) labour union were constantly against the idea of a single labour code or the *cadre unique*.¹³⁷

Resistance from the local chiefs and other local traditional rulers who saw their powers drastically reduced with the end of the more overt French forced labour policy was another reason why for the persistence of forced labour. The role of chiefs as has been seen in previous discussions was that of complicity and resistance to have the status quo changed. Therefore, the chiefs also posed a problem during this period as they were deriving much benefits from the process of labour recruitment. Part of the recruited labourers were sent to work in their own plantations while a majority was sent to participate in public works organized by the colonial administration. It has been seen how during this period, these local chiefs together with the French colonial authorities passed an order prohibiting the free migration of villagers in some cases either from one village to the other or from rural to urban settlements. Most of the people who migrated wanted to flee from the new forced labour which had now taken the name of communal labour or emergency situations. The only argument the Mudaliar report found to support this type of forced labour was that it encouraged development in the colonies to a lesser extent. On a more serious note, this Committee condemned both France and Britain for some elements of disguised forced labour. This was particularly in cases where both countries kept on using the terms “State of emergency” and “civic duties” in order to justify continuing forms of coercion.¹³⁸ The Mudaliar Committee in this case was an initiative of the ILO which unlike other initiatives was out to investigate on instances of forced labour. Keese believes that the very idea of forced labour was hard to end in the French colonial mindset. They carried this on till the very end later in the year 1958 when they began the process of power transfer to the Africans.¹³⁹ The delay by the French colonial administration to ratify most of the major conventions against forced labour may partly justify this.

The application of the different types of taxes in colonial Africa became another form of continuity in forced labour. Native chiefs were required periodically to supply contingents of able-bodied men, the number of which were fixed by the authorities. These men were used primarily for public works, although some of them might be turned over to private employers. Moreover, even in the case of recruitment by private individuals, coercion played a large part

¹³⁷ Chafer, *The end of empire*, 102.

¹³⁸ Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 207.

¹³⁹ Keese, “Slow Abolition,” 395.

since operations were carried out with the help and direct participation of the authorities.¹⁴⁰ This was done through the levying of taxes as a form of punishment to individuals who did not comply to set regulations. An ILO report indicated that even up to 1958, the head or hut taxes which constituted an element of forced labour still existed in most African countries. As it was a central element in forcing Africans to work.¹⁴¹ In the French Cameroons, this was equally manifested in the way the paramount chiefs interacted with their subjects especially the peasants. In the Portuguese colonies, these types of colonial taxes were extracted under the *impotoindigena* tax system.

Labour requisition became another disguised form for the extraction of forced labour before and after the ratification of international conventions by France and her counterparts. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, the chiefs were still at the centre of this exercise. In the French Cameroons, it was very common to observe this practice among the chiefs of densely populated areas. These densely populated areas were either used as labour recruitment reservoirs or backup areas for those places which needed the labour most and for public projects such as railway construction, bridges and other public and private projects. For instance, most of the railway projects either left uncompleted by the Germans or destroyed during the First World War were now done through the method of labour requisition.

Apart from these continuities in the labour question as from the late 1940s, the ILO began to chart a new path for the organization. This consisted of diverting its area of activities to involve development and human rights. This appeared to have blurred or slowed down the resolve to completely stamp out forced labour. This gave countries like France and to an extent Portugal and Belgium the leeway to carry out policies which led to the persistence of forced labour during the later part of the colonial period. It is important to make mention of the fact that before this period, the ILO had been accused of focusing more on Europe and also its centre of power being Europe still. David Morse had just taken function as the Director-General of the ILO and through his efforts, the ILO transformed into a service agency catering for specific demands of “underdeveloped nations.” This was a way of making the ILO representative of all states and not merely certain groups among them.¹⁴² On the other hand, this diversification of its area of activities by setting up one of the organization’s offices in Africa not only seemed to have reassured colonial subjects of their place within the

¹⁴⁰ Bellucci and Eckert, *General Labour History*, 85.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴² Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 129.

organization but it also led to the weakening of the organization's resolve in pushing through the forced labour question.¹⁴³ In the French Cameroons, this was not so visible owing to the fact that the territory was indirectly represented by the French colonial administration. A close study of French activities in the territory during this period shows a slight shift from the previous economic policy based principally on a liberal economic orientation to one which began to make concessions in the direction of power transfer and more concentration on the development of local infrastructure. France like her counterparts who had colonies did not feel comfortable with the technical assistance programme being distributed to the colonies since she thought it would open her colonial administration in the French Cameroons and other territories for more ILO internal scrutiny.¹⁴⁴

Finally, the continuous practice of forced labour in the post-World War II was reflected in the ILO conventions that were adopted to tackle the same issue. The last of such during the period leading to independence was the Forced Labour Convention 105 of 1957. The Ruegger Committee which had been put in place to prepare its content and follow on the works of the Mudaliar Committee finally got its task done in 1957. Even though the committee found it difficult to access reports from colonial territories, they found out that elements of coercion still existed in these colonies. Amongst its recommendations particularly with reference to the colonial territories, forced labour was banned as a means of political coercion and political education. It was banned as a method of mobilizing and using labour for purposes of economic development. It was equally banned as a means of labour discipline and also as a punishment for having participated in strikes and as a means of racial, social, national or religious discrimination.¹⁴⁵ The remarkable thing about the Convention 105 is that the recommendations were drawn based especially on field reports on the different ways the colonial administrations had fine-tuned the different terminologies in order to have leverage to carry on with practices of forced labour. The experts who met and came up with these recommendations probably had understood that the colonial powers had in the past been juggling with previous ILO conventions in order to dodge from being convicted or criticized.

¹⁴³ Archive Nationale Yaoundé, Affaires Politiques et Administratives 11819, *Charles Atangana et le chef de la région de Nyong et Sanaga*.

¹⁴⁴ Maul, *Human Rights, Development and Decolonization*, 148.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

3.3 Labour debates between 1947-1957

The late 1940s up to 1960 differed significantly from the previous period. Three major issues marked this period. This was a phase of the actual implementation of the post 1944 recommendations for both the ILO within the framework of Philadelphia Conference and for French colonies within the framework of the post-Brazzaville Conference of 1944 arrangements. The world was fast polarizing with the intensification of the Cold War. Again, more weight during this period was on political issues within the colonies.

Secondly, the ILO structurally had expanded considerably from her traditional area of activity to include development and matters of human rights and social justice in its global agenda. Even though at this point the ILO was still plagued by the issue of internal concerted efforts in championing its course, this organization had come of age. This was reflected in its Convention 105 as it stipulated the abolition of certain forms of “forced or compulsory labour” of a political character which were constituting a violation of the rights of man. This declaration was strongly tied to the human rights discourse so prominent at the end of the 1940s.¹⁴⁶

Most colonies during this period were bent on attaining self-rule and subsequent independence. This may have affected the struggle to resolve the labour question in the late colonial period. As a result, the labour question still persisted in the post-independence period with the same issues left unresolved by the colonial regime.

Still within the ILO, more divergence in terms of what ought to constitute cases of forced labour intensified from the late 1940s up to the early 1960s. The Cold War atmosphere had made the Soviet Union to continuously oppose any move or initiatives of passing the final judgement against forced labour. This was more visible as from 1954 when the Soviet Union joined the ILO. The voices of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc representatives augmented their cause by advocating a new interpretation of forced labour as something which was mainly caused by capitalist exploitation.¹⁴⁷ This means that even when with the adoption of ILO Convention 105 in 1957, the ILO had not still had a common stance. Some colonial powers were still not willing to ratify the major conventions during this period. This was the case for the French colonial administration. France still based most of her arguments on the French

¹⁴⁶ Kott, “The forced labour issue”, 322.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 328.

labour code which was partially extended to the overseas territories as from 1946. Generally, the enthusiasm that had characterized the French colonial administration's move by initiating labour standards which were not in line with ILO standards in the colonies had begun to die down as from the late 1940s. The French colonial administration seemed to have begun seeing the need to follow international labour standards from the ILO. One reason for this shift in the French colonial administration's position might have been the momentum of nationalists in the colonies who by this time were about to seize independence from France. In the French Cameroons, between 1950 to 1960 the French colonial administration dedicated most of its efforts at putting in place structures and actors who would protect French interest once the official colonization was over.¹⁴⁸ In another way, the "wind of change" which had just started blowing across the entire French colonial empire in Africa was felt in the French Cameroons through an automatic shift from economic and social concerns to political demands. In the French plantations, factories and other public projects in the coastal city of Douala, more of the riots this time were being articulated around the demand for self-rule and independence.¹⁴⁹

Therefore, the forced labour question from the late 1940s up to 1960 when French Cameroon got independence, labour debate within the territory seemed to have been weakened mainly because of two reasons. First, the French colonial administration during this period being aware of its weakening position decided to grant concessions which led to the loosening of some regulations formerly applied under the new French colonial labour code. Secondly, Nationalists were more concentrated on political emancipation which as from 1955 took a bloody turn.¹⁵⁰ This had a great impact on the labour question. Formerly, labour debates within the French cameroons had taken place within an atmosphere by less brutality and violence. This means that labour negotiations and debates automatically was relegated just to resurface in the post-independence period under different actors and context.

¹⁴⁸ A N Y, 1AC 85, " *Couriers, Haut Commissaire de la Republique Française au Cameroun, 1959.* "

¹⁴⁹ Atangana Martin R. "French capitalism and nationalism in Cameroon." *African Studies Review* 40, 1 (1997) 90.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

4 Conclusion

The International Labour Organization emerged from the ashes of World War I with the aim to improve the lot of workers around the world. Between 1922-1960, it struggled to play this role in different situations and in different contexts. The organization through different stages from the early colonial period politics to the later part of colonial struggled to adapt to different challenges of the time. In the early 1920s, the ILO adopted conventions which to an extent regulated the way some major issues related to labour were conducted. To this effect, Cooper sees these moves especially in the 1920s as formalistic (the Anti-Slavery Convention of 1926) since it was committing the organization to engage once more in an area considered fought and won the organization into venturing to a trouble area (anti-slavery campaign) considered fought and won in the past.

This criticism of the formalistic nature of most of the ILO arrangements on the labour question particularly in the colonies made the League of Nations to task the ILO to conduct an investigation of “the best means of preventing forced or compulsory labour from developing into conditions analogous to slavery” since the issue was becoming more complex and acute.¹⁵¹ This was because the main problem was to define situations of free or coerced labour. This was a complex issue in the colonies especially as in most of the African colonies, free labour in the form of communal labour was a social obligation of individuals or group of persons within communities. Therefore, communal labour is seen as a concept in African social setting which denotes a satiation where members of a community freely and happily offer labour for community projects. In this work, it has been seen how the colonial powers distorted this concept in order to project to the ILO and the world at large that communal labour organized by the colonial administration was synonymous to the traditional African communal labour. It was for this reason that the Committee of Experts appointed by the ILO to investigate on instances of forced labour in the colonies produced a recommendation which made certain rectifications on the labour question. It ended up with the adoption of the 1930 ILO Convention against forced labour against the wishes of some major colonial powers such as France, Belgium and Portugal.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, 29.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 29.

This work has largely concentrated on the labour question in the French Cameroons. Through the actions different set of actors in the French Cameroons such as the French colonial administrators, the local chiefs and what was going on at the global level, it has been seen how the labour question took different twists in the territory. With pressure from the ILO even though lacking a unified concerted action from its members, labour standards in the territory became ameliorated.

Through the concept of competing universalism, it has also been seen how France on one hand with her own designed colonial labour standards, she struggled to resist or ignore the recommendations, conventions and regulations on international labour standards in her overseas territories particularly the French Cameroons.

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4.6 Appendices

Appendix 1: A warning to villagers who declare ages far below their real ages

This is a circular issued by the French High Commissioner, **M. Bouquet** (the main representative of the French colonial administration in the French Cameroons) to some major local administrators informing them that he is aware of the tricks used by villagers in order to evade communal labour recruitments. This he says how villagers have devised a strategy of declaring false ages as a means of escape from being recruited for labour. He cites sections of the law which make this act criminal and punishable. He also instructs judges to verify this in the civil status registers. He makes mention of other documents needed to justify the ages such as baptismal cards. This type of labour recruitment was classified under labour recruitment for emergency purposes.

MINISTRE DU CAMEROUN
DIRECTION DES AFFAIRES
CENTRALES ET ADMINISTRATIVES

LIBERTÉ - ÉGALITÉ - FRATERNITÉ

-:-

COMPTABILITÉ

Yaoundé, le 14 Janvier 1954

N° 92 cf/AN/2

- C I R C U L A I R E -

Ch. Lallemand Justice
n° 21 144
18 JAN 1954

LE HAUT COMMISSAIRE DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE
AU CAMEROUN

Messieurs les CHEFS DE RÉGION et de SUBDIVISION

Messieurs les PRÉSIDENTS des Tribunaux du
1er degré.

Mon attention a été appelée sur le nombre croissant
de requérants qui essayent, par des moyens frauduleux, de
se faire délivrer un acte d'Etat-Civil mentionnant un âge
inférieur à leur âge réel.

C'est ainsi qu'un étudiant a tenté d'obtenir un
jugement rectificatif de son Etat-Civil en vue de demander
une bourse d'enseignement, dont l'octroi est subordonné à
l'âge du candidat.

Un Agent des Chemins de Fer a versé à son dossier un
jugement supplétif le déclarant né en 1916, alors que les
autres documents présentés à l'Administration établissent
sa naissance en 1905. L'intéressé espérait ainsi retarder
de onze ans l'époque de sa mise à la retraite. D'autres cas
ont été signalés récemment.

Aussi j'attire à nouveau de façon toute spéciale,
l'attention des Présidents des Tribunaux du 1er degré chargés
de la reconstitution ou de la rectification des actes de
l'Etat-Civil dans les conditions fixées par l'arrêté du
16 Mars 1935, sur la nécessité absolue de s'entourer de
toutes les garanties nécessaires pour l'établissement d'un
document qui doit déterminer la vie civile d'un individu
de façon irréfutable.

En effet, des témoins cités peuvent se rendre coupables
de complaisance et, dans ce cas, il convient d'ouvrir une
information judiciaire.

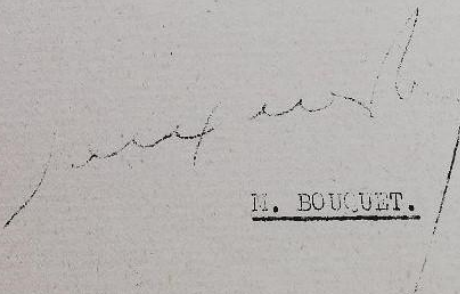
... 2

Toutes investigations sont permises aux Présidents des Juridictions du 1er degré, pour établir aussi exactement que possible, l'âge d'un individu dont la naissance n'a pas été enregistrée. Parmi celle-ci, il peut être fait appel aux tableaux de recensement - aux actes de baptême délivrés par les Missions et aux Archives de la Direction de l'Enseignement lorsqu'il s'agit d'écolier ou d'étudiant et surtout, il convient d'exiger un certificat d'âge apparent établi par le Médecin-Chef de la Région et de vérifier si un acte de naissance ou un jugement supplétif n'a pas déjà été établi antérieurement.

Si les demandes de jugements supplétifs d'acte d'état-civil doivent être satisfaites dans les meilleurs délais, il n'en demeure pas moins que vous devez apporter un soin minutieux à l'établissement de ces documents authentiques car la responsabilité du Président du Tribunal du 1er degré peut être engagée si cet acte est, par la suite, reconnu comme manifestement contraire à la vérité, faute d'une enquête suffisante et n'a été demandé que dans une intention frauduleuse.

P. le Haut-Commissaire
Par déléation
Le Directeur des Affaires Politiques

Copie à : Parquet Général
D^{on} Personnel
D^{on} Enseignement


M. BOUCQUET.