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BLANTYRE TRANSFORMED: CLASS, CONFLICT AND NATIONALISM IN URBAN MALAWI*

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THERE are good reasons why the remarkable outpouring of work on Southern African urban history that has taken place over the last twenty years has largely bypassed Malawi.[1] To the overwhelmingly rural character of the Malawi economy must be added the weak impact of settler colonialism in the interwar period and hence the failure of Blantyre, one of the oldest colonial settlements in Central Africa, with a history going back to the foundation of the Blantyre mission in 1876, to develop as a substantial commercial centre. This feature was reinforced in turn by Sir Harry Johnston's decision, taken in 1891, to site the colonial capital at Zomba and by the construction in 1907 at Limbe, five miles from Blantyre, of the railway terminus for the protectorate.

Urban development in Malawi was therefore not concentrated on a single dominant commercial and administrative centre, as was the case in neighbouring Tanganyika. Rather it was split between three equally impoverished settlements, containing small populations ranging in size in 1945 from approximately 4,600 in Blantyre and Zomba to 7,100 in Limbe.[2] Far more Malawians, in consequence, experienced urban culture as labour migrants in Johannesburg or Salisbury, where an estimated 10,000 Malawians were living in 1938, than they did working at home.[3]

The weak and fragmented nature of urbanization in Malawi up to the Second World War should not, however, blind historians to the social and political consequences of the rapid growth in the two decades after 1945 of the twin towns, Blantyre and Limbe (united as the municipality of Blantyre in 1956). Several recent studies have touched on aspects of these developments. Megan Vaughan and John Iliffe have both provided valuable analyses of social relations and the problem of poverty in and around Blantyre.[4] Joey

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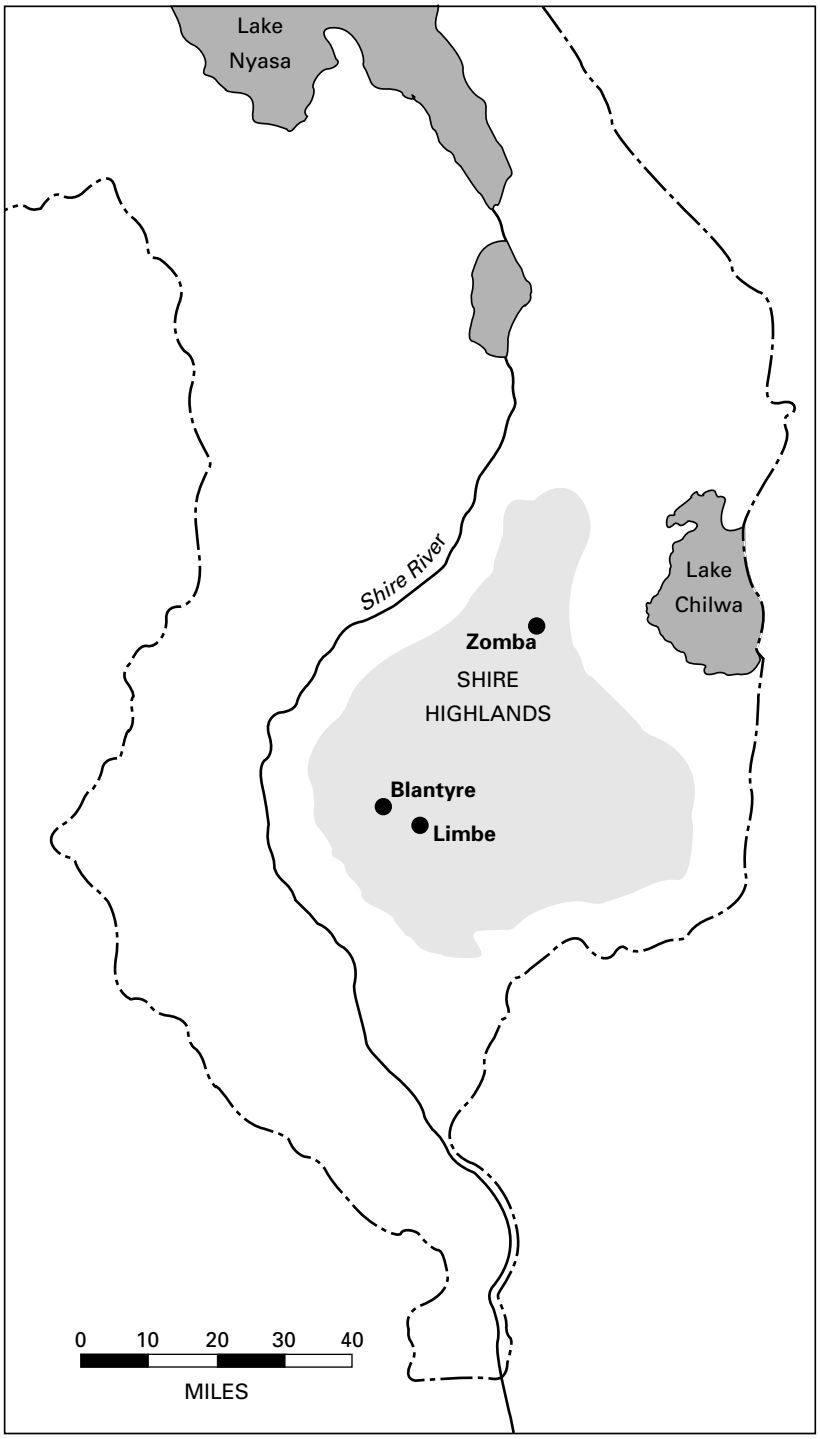
[1] For a useful introduction see Paul Maylam, 'Explaining the apartheid city: 20 Years of South African urban historiography', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, XXI, (1995), 19–38.

[2] R. R. Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey of the British Colonial Empire* (London, 1949), ii, 536.

[3] Richard Gray, *The Two Nations* (London, 1960), 92; G. N. Burden, *Nyasaland Native Labour in Southern Rhodesia* (Zomba, 1938).

[4] Megan Vaughan, *The Story of an African Famine* (Cambridge, 1987); John Iliffe, 'The poor in the modern history of Malawi', in Centre for African Studies, University



Map 1. The Shire Highlands.

Power, in the only comprehensive academic study of the city, has cast light on the activities of self-employed African entrepreneurs.[5] From rather different directions, John McCracken and Tony Woods have discussed the role of railway workers in the development of the labour movement.[6] But nowhere has a systematic attempt been made to relate the character and changing circumstances of Blantyre to the post-war outbreak of worker militancy and to its tangled relationship with Malawian nationalism.

This article seeks to build on the studies discussed above in order to demonstrate the ways in which the labour movement in Blantyre and Limbe was shaped by the particular urban environment in which it operated. It rejects Woods's claim that the emergence of mass nationalism under the leadership of the Malawi Congress Party was crucial to the growth of 'proletarian consciousness' in Nyasaland,[7] and instead suggests that Blantyre's labour movement was warily independent of the dominant nationalist tradition, sharing many of the political aspirations of the M.C.P, yet with distinct priorities of its own. Furthermore, it argues that the distinctive form that urbanization took in Blantyre influenced the character of political mobilisation. A minority of workers, many of them employed on the railway, were housed in compounds not dissimilar in character to those found in the classic Southern African colonial town. Most workers in Blantyre, however, were non-migrants, living in independent villages fringing the town, into which they walked each day. Their exposure to levels of poverty remarkable even by Southern African standards combined, for a fortunate few, with favourable opportunities for economic self-advancement assisted in the construction of a distinctive political culture in Blantyre in the two decades prior to independence.

SEGREGATION AND POVERTY IN BLANTYRE

From the time of the official founding of the township in 1895, Blantyre, as John Iliffe has noted, 'exemplified that combination of colonial poverty and Southern African racialism that was Nyasaland's particular misfortune.'[8] Over the previous decade several European traders and estate owners had staked out land claims in the valley neighbouring the Church of Scotland mission and it was they, rather than the government now based at the administrative capital of Zomba, who were to play the leading role in laying down roads and in defining the racially segregated character of the settlement. Male Europeans only were permitted to stand for the pioneer town council elected in 1897 although, in theory at least, Asians and Africans 'possessing

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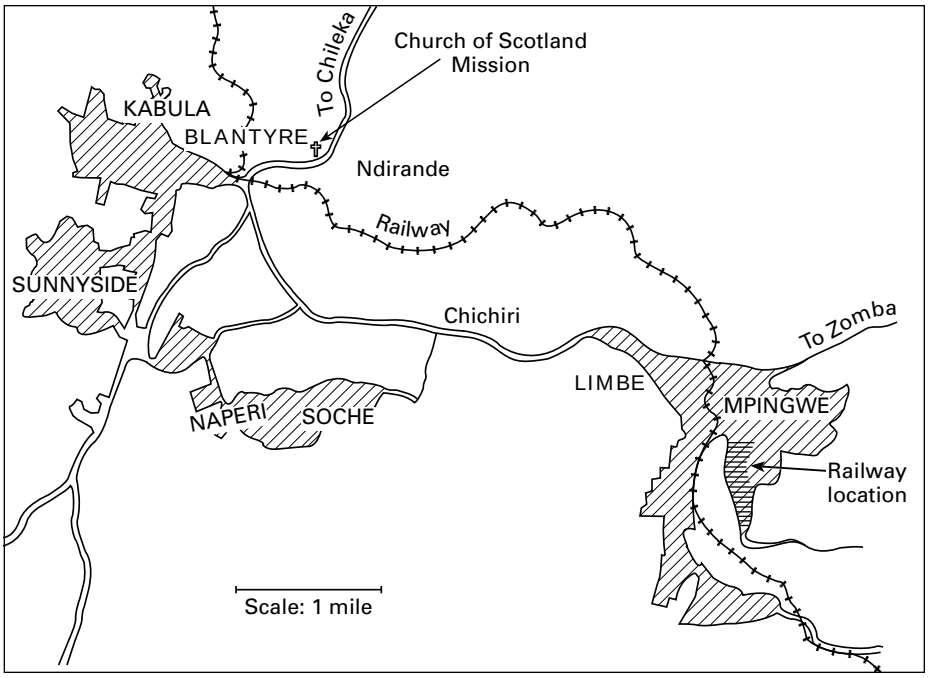
of Edinburgh, *Malawi*: *An Alternative Pattern of Development* (Edinburgh, 1984), 245–92.

[5] Joey Power, 'Individual enterprise and enterprising individuals: African entrepreneurship in Blantyre and Limbe, 1907–1953' (Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1991).

[6] John McCracken, 'Labour in Nyasaland: an assessment of the 1960 railway workers' strike', *J. Southern Afr. Studies*, XIV (1988); Tony Woods, '"Bread with freedom and peace": rail workers in Malawi 1954–1975', *J. of Southern Afr. Studies*, XVIII (1992). See also Mapopa Chipeta. 'Labour in colonial Malawi: the growth and development of the Malawian wage labour force during the colonial period, 1890–1964' (Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1986).

[7] Woods, 'Rail workers in Malawi', 727.

[8] Iliffe, 'The poor in the modern history of Malawi', 260.



Map 2. Blantyre–Limbe in the 1950s.

property within the Township of the annual value of £100' were eligible to vote.[9] Indian traders were forbidden to purchase property outside the centrally located but increasingly crowded 'Asiatic Ward'. And Africans were banned from providing housing for themselves by the provision 'that no wattle and daub houses be allowed within the Township and that only buildings of brick, wood or iron be allowed, and that such houses should be of no less value than £50.'[10]

With the passage of time, by-laws discriminating against Asians were gradually relaxed under pressure from government, but further segregationist measures were imposed on Africans. Following the appointment of a township police force in 1899, financed by the rate payers, a curfew was imposed on Africans who were forbidden to remain in the township between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. without a pass provided by their employers.[11] No Africans were allowed to purchase property; none, accordingly, was permitted on the electoral roll – a situation that continued right up to the eve of independence. As late as the early 1950s, Africans were served through a window in most European-owned shops; hardly a single hotel would accept African custom.[12]

[9] Blantyre Town Council Minutes, 10 June 1897, MNA BL 2/1/1/1.

[10] Blantyre Town Council Minutes, 21 Sept. 1897, MNA BL 2/1/1/1.

[11] *Central African Times*, 12 Dec. 1903; Blantyre Township Bye-Laws, Feb. 1913; Blantyre and Limbe Township Ordinances, 1930, MNA S1/392/19. See also John McCracken, 'Coercion and control in Nyasaland: aspects of the history of a colonial police force', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XXVII (1986), 132–3.

[12] Geoffrey J. Morton, *Just the Job : Some Experiences of a Colonial Policeman* (London, 1957), 234; Power, 'Individual enterprise', 35.

Yet, while at one level Blantyre conformed to Southern African type, at another the town diverged from it as a consequence of the negligible resources available to the local council. Perhaps the situation would have been different had Nyasaland's capital not been sited at Zomba, 40 miles to the north, or if the Shire Highlands Railway Company, closely followed by the Imperial Tobacco Company had not established its headquarters at Limbe, five miles from Blantyre on the Zomba road. In the event, the division of urban Malawi into three centres, each of them located in the Shire Highlands, ensured that all three would remain weak, not least because Blantyre and Limbe in particular were dependent for their growth on a settler population which went into decline from the mid-1920s and did not recover numerically or economically until after the Second World War.[13]

Blantyre's European population, resident mainly in the suburb of Sunnyside, therefore remained small, rising from 192 in 1907 to only 379 in 1947. The number of full ratepayers was significantly less: three hundred in 1952.[14] Capital, in consequence, was in short supply, in part because the government attempted to impose the cost of services on the residents. In the 1920s, both Blantyre and Limbe produced plans for native locations modelled loosely on those in Bulawayo and Pietermaritzburg.[15] But with neither the European ratepayers nor the government prepared to pay, progress was agonizingly slow. Not until 1936 were the first thirty houses constructed on the Blantyre Council location at Naperi and they, according to a later report, were of 'unbelievable' standard, consisting of 'windowless brick and thatch hovels in poor repair'.[16] Several private companies – most notably the Imperial Tobacco Company and Nyasaland Railways – also provided housing for their employees.[17] But the great majority of workers lived elsewhere, some in illicit shacks or in the back verandahs of shops but most in villages under African control. Some of these were close to town, in the settlement at Ndirande, on the lower slopes of the mountain of that name, and at Chichiri mid-way between Blantyre and Limbe; others were up to 12 miles distant.

Much useful information on the character of Blantyre–Limbe's peri-urban villages is provided in the series of surveys carried out under the supervision of David Bettison in the mid-1950s.[18] Most of the villages studied possessed

[13] Robin Palmer, 'White farmers in Malawi: before and after the depression', *Afr. Affairs*, LXXXIV (1985), 211–45.

[14] Annual Report of the Blantyre District for 1947, MNA NS 3/1/4; Iliffe, 'Poor in the modern history of Malawi', 263.

[15] Blantyre Town Council minutes, 28 Feb. 1922, 30 May 1922, 30 May 1923, 1 Aug. 1923, MNA BL 2/1/1/2.

[16] *Annual Report of the Nyasaland Medical Department for* 1936, PRO CO 626/15; 'Report by the Advisory Board of Health on the Sanitary Services in Blantyre and Limbe', 1951, MNA PC 53/5/1.

[17] For a discussion of ITC housing see W. Twiston Davies, *Fifty Years of Progress. An Account of the African Organisation of the Imperial Tobacco Company, 1907–1957* (Bristol, n.d. [1958]), 38–40.

[18] David G. Bettison, 'The demographic structure of seventeen villages, Blantyre-Limbe, Nyasaland', *Rhodes-Livingstone Communications* XI (Lusaka, 1958); Bettison, 'The social and economic structure of seventeen villages, Blantyre-Limbe, Nyasaland',

a pronounced rural-urban hybrid quality: women retained access to land on which they cultivated maize and a variety of other crops, while most men worked in town.[19] In 1957, 73 per cent of males resident in villages lying within four miles of Blantyre were working there, as were 66 per cent of those living between four and eight miles from the town.[20] In striking contrast to Salisbury, where migrants from Nyasaland and Mozambique formed a majority of the African population up to the mid-1950s, the population of Blantyre's peri-urban villages was 'remarkably stable', with some 71 per cent of adults in 1957 having been born in or close to the villages in which they were residing.[21] According to the somewhat dubious statistics collected on 'tribal affiliation', 36 per cent designated themselves 'Yao', signifying that they were descended from people who had moved into the district prior to the founding of the township, while a further 34 per cent described themselves as 'Ngoni', meaning that their relatives had come from the Ncheu and Dedza districts of the Central Province, a trend that dates back to the 1890s. Virtually no Tumbuka or Tonga labour migrants from the Northern Province were recorded, though there is evidence to suggest that some northerners worked on the railway and lived in the compound opened at Limbe in 1947.[22] With the exception of these and of some employees of the Imperial Tobacco Company, wage labourers in Blantyre-Limbe were thus predominantly stabilized, living with their wives and family in a semi-rural environment which was largely independent of colonial control.

The particular character of Blantyre's urban culture is best represented by Ndirande, a sprawling settlement which had its origin in the proliferation of villages in the vicinity of the Church of Scotland mission from the mid-1870s. By the 1950s, Ndirande had become the home of more than 3,000 inhabitants but it remained officially invisible – absent for example from any town map prior to the 1960s – and saved by its Trust Land status from council interference. A place of exceptional poverty, it also provided some Malawians with exceptional opportunities. Townsfolk resident here had a lower calorie intake on average in 1938 than that of any of the rural villagers from the Central Province studied by the Platt Nutritional Survey, despite the fact that virtually all of the Ndirande families had access to some food not obtained by cash.[23] A fortunate few, however, had opportunities for economic

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Rhodes-Livingstone Communications XII (Lusaka, 1958); Bettison, 'Migrancy and social structure in peri-urban communities in Nyasaland', in R. J. Apthorpe (ed.), *Present Interrelations in Central African Rural and Urban Life* (Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 11th Conference Proceedings, Lusaka, 1958); D. G. Bettison and P. G. Rigby, 'Patterns of income and expenditure, Blantyre-Limbe, Nyasaland', *Rhodes-Livingstone Communications* XX (Lusaka, 1961). For an excellent account emphasising the economic role of women in these villages, see Vaughan, *Story of an African Famine*, 128–32.

[19] See particularly Bettison, 'Social and economic structure of a sample of peri-urban villages'.

[20] Bettison, 'Migrancy and social structure',

[21] Bettison, 'Demographic structure of seventeen villages', 73–4. For the high percentage of 'non-indigenous' Africans in Salisbury, see Brian Raftopoulos, 'Nationalism and labour in Salisbury, 1953–1965', *J. Southern Afr. Studies*, XXI (1995), 82.

[22] Bettison, 'Demographic structure of seventeen villages', 18–19.

[23] Veronica Berry and Celia Petty (eds.), *The Nyasaland Survey Papers, 1938–1943. Agriculture, Food and Health* (London, 1992), 138–43.

advancement that were relatively rare in other southern African towns. As early as 1901, two enterprising 'native tailors', probably from Ndirande, were working on their own account at Kabula Hill, making jackets and trousers for Europeans.[24] These were the forerunners of the 180 tailors, the 42 butchers, the 12 bicycle and gramophone repairers and the 25 blacksmiths that the District Commissioner, Ion Ramsey, counted in the environs of Blantyre in 1931.[25] There were also four laundry owners, one of whom, Charles Thomas Mtemenyama, employed a staff of 14 and netted profits of £90 a year, and several dealers in foodstuffs, timber and furniture.[26] Some women traded in foodstuffs either in the Blantyre or Ndirande market; many more took to the brewing of beer and particularly of the illegal spirit *kachasu*, though this was an activity better suited to women in villages where land for maize growing was relatively more abundant than it was in Ndirande itself. According to one estimate, in the early 1930s successful beer brewers from villages close to Blantyre were making profits of from £8 to £10 a year.[27]

The 1940s were a period of rapid growth in Blantyre–Limbe fuelled largely by the rise in cash-crop prices, notably for tobacco, and from the resulting increase in the number and size of processing factories. This in turn interacted with a building boom which, in striking contrast to earlier years, was financed largely from government funds. Expenditure by the Public Works Department increased tenfold between 1946 and 1951, with Blantyre–Limbe gaining the lion's share of the investment as a consequence of the decision to diversify new government building away from Zomba following the destructive earthslip suffered by the capital in 1947.[28]

Further funds became available with the establishment of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1953 though, as the Governor, Colby, was at pains to emphasize, well over half of revenue expenditure in Nyasaland continued to be drawn from territorial sources.[29] In less than a decade between 1948 and 1956, Blantyre's dusty and pot-holed roads were surfaced, hundreds of houses were built, and work began on a number of major projects including the 400-bed Queen Victoria Hospital, completed in 1958. Factories producing soap, cement and other goods were opened, marking Nyasaland's first faltering venture into the manufacturing sector. New buildings were erected by the score resulting in a demand for bricks met largely by African entrepreneurs. Several new firms established offices in the township.

Compared with the startling growth of Salisbury, Dar es Salaam or Nairobi, Blantyre's expansion remained remarkably modest. Nevertheless,

[24] *Central African Times*, 30 Nov. 1901.

[25] Blantyre District Annual Report, 1931, MNA NSB 7/1/2. For further information on earnings in the informal sector, see Iliffe, 'Poor in the modern history of Malawi', 262.

[26] For further details on Mtemenyama and other small businessmen in this period, see Power, 'Individual enterprise and enterprising individuals', 173–93.

[27] S. Thomas, Secretary for Blantyre Native Association, to PC, Southern Province, MNA NS 1/3/4, quoted in Power, *ibid.* 199–200. For the continuing importance of *kachasu* in the economy of women in the vicinity of Blantyre, see H. D. Ng'wane, 'Economics of kacasu distilling and brewing of African beer in a Blantyre-Limbe village', in R. J. Apthorpe (ed.), *Present Interrelations in Central African Rural and Urban Life*.

[28] *Annual Report of the Nyasaland Public Works Department for 1951*; 'Proposal to remove capital from Zomba', 1947, PRO CO 525/213.

[29] Colby to Lennox-Boyd, 24 Mar. 1956, PRO CO 1015/1133.

the twin towns grew in a decade from two scattered settlements with a combined population of around 4,000 in 1937 to 'the nearest thing to a frontier town one could hope to find outside a Wild West film', numbering 12,000 inhabitants in 1947.[30] Nine years later, Blantyre–Limbe was a thriving town with a population close on 55,000, if neighbouring villages are taken into account; by 1966 it had grown into a significant city of 109,461 inhabitants.[31] Part of this growth came from the incorporation within the city boundaries of peri-urban villages, which previously had been excluded from demographic surveys. Much of it, however, resulted from the sharp increase in the number of inhabitants of whom, in 1956, only 2,500 were European and 2,700 Asian. Ten years later, there were 101,500 Africans in Blantyre as compared with 3,364 Europeans and 4,500 Asians.

Population growth was only one aspect of a much wider set of changes influencing the behaviour of working people in Blantyre. With imported goods in short supply, prices for hoes, cotton goods, bicycles and tyres rose rapidly between 1939 and 1947, contributing to the doubling of the cost of living for most urban Africans.[32] Food prices also rose, with a particularly sharp increase in the market price for maize flour, the staple food, from 0.5d per lb in 1939 to 1d in 1945, and up to 4d or 5d during the worst months of the great famine of 1948–9.[33] With labour in short supply in the years after 1946, pressure on wages was intense and they too rose, though from a very low base and probably at a slower rate than the cost of living up to the late 1940s. Basic wages for unskilled male workers, exclusive of rations, rose from 6s per month in 1939 to 10s in 1946 and 12s 6d in 1947 – a figure that remained unchanged until 1950.[34] In certain occupations, however, much lower rates of increase were recorded. Unskilled railway workers received 9s 6d a month in 1938 but only 10–15s in 1947, plus a cost of living allowance of 5s a month for Blantyre and Limbe. Senior domestic servants were paid an average 20s a month in 1938; some of them were still being paid only 25s in 1947. This was in contrast with the wages of 40s or more commanded by Malawian cooks working in Southern Rhodesia.[35]

For those workers unfortunate enough to live in town, wages were only part of the problem. Even in the 1930s, housing conditions were bleak but with the growth of population they deteriorated further. Some temporary alleviation of Blantyre's dreadful sanitary conditions had taken place in the early 1930s with the installation of a piped supply of drinking water to the town, paid for through a grant from the Colonial and Development Welfare

[30] Intelligence Report for half year ending June 1937, MNA S2/6iii/27; Blantyre District Annual Report for 1947, MNA NS 3/1/4; Morton, *Just the Job*, 236.

[31] J. G. Pike and G. T. Rimmington, *Malawi : A Geographical Study* (London, 1965), 169; *Malawi Population Census 1966 : Final Report* (Zomba, 1967), 34.

[32] Blantyre District Annual Report for 1947, MNA NS 3/1/4; DC Blantyre to PC Southern Province, MNA NSB 3/12/1.

[33] *Annual Reports of the Nyasaland Labour Department*, 1946–49. Vaughan, *Story of an African Famine*, 29–49, provides a graphic account of changes in the price and availability of food during the famine.

[34] *Annual Report of the Labour Branch of Provincial Administration, 1938*, PRO CO 626/18; *Annual Reports of the Labour Department, 1946–1951*.

[35] Southern Province Annual Report for 1947, MNA NS 3/1/12. For further information on economic change in the immediate post-war period, see Vaughan, *Story of an African Famine*, 102–7.

Fund.[36] No waterborne system of sewage disposal was constructed, however, and little effort was made by the Town Council to keep pace with the growing population. A survey carried out by the Government Health Inspector in 1949 'revealed a deplorable state of affairs.'[37]

> In the central areas of the Township over-crowding was rife and subdivision of trading plots up to 1/40th of an acre was recorded. Shop assistants were sleeping in shops, their beds being screened off by temporary partitions. African servants were sleeping on the back verandahs of shops, in bath rooms and even in disused latrines ... Waste water latrine washings and liquid excrement were disposed of from plots by earth or broken concrete drains to the main road drains in the townships, which are open and flow through the main streets to the nearest river bed. The water in the river beds was thus grossly polluted and this water was the main source from which African domestic supplies were drawn and in which ablutions and the washing of laundry took place.
>
> The standards of housing for African employees were unbelievable. Town Council lines consisted of windowless brick and thatch hovels in poor repair and for which rents were charged varying from 3s to 7s 6d per month. There was virtually no latrine provision and no water-supply ... Night soil disposal sites were situated dangerously in the centre of built up areas and were maintained in a shockingly filthy state.

Some improvements in the disposal of human excrement were introduced in Blantyre in 1950, but the situation in Limbe 'was not so fortunate'. Writing in 1951, a board of experts noted: 'There is a rapidly increasing African urban population for which no provision is made in the way of sanitary services'. The only water supply available, the streams running through the townships, continued to be heavily polluted. 'The advent of serious epidemic disease', they concluded, 'is only a matter of time ...'[38]

THE EMERGENCE OF A LABOUR MOVEMENT

It is against this background of urban deprivation and rising prices that the first wave of worker militancy in Blantyre emerged. Labour unrest in Malawi has a long history, going back at the Blantyre mission to the 1870s when 'strikes were a common occurrence several times in one day'.[39] Nevertheless, while Malawian migrants had been deeply involved in worker protest in the inter-war years in places as far apart as Cape Town, Shamva and the Copperbelt, there is little evidence that the experience they gained in the south was directly employed in labour disputes in their homeland. The myth of 'Kerementi' (Clements Kadalie), the visionary Malawian leader who had ensured 'that black men are allowed to have a union so that they can speak to the whites as one clan speaks to another', circulated widely in Nyasaland during the 1920s.[40] Yet neither Kadalie's prompting of Isa Lawrence in 1926 nor the return to Nyasaland of his right-hand supporter, Robert Sambo, in 1929 resulted in the founding of a branch of the Industral and Commercial

[36] *Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Nyasaland*, 1931, CO 626/10.

[37] Secretary, Advisory Board of Health to PC Southern Province, 26 Apr. 1951, MNA PC 53/5/1. [38] *Ibid.* [39] *Life and Work in British Central Africa*, 15 June 1898.

[40] T. Cullen Young, 'The native newspaper', *Africa*, XI (1938), 60 quoted in George Shepperson, *Myth and Reality in Malawi* (Evanston, 1966), 5.

Workers Union in the country from which they came.[41] As Palmer has noted, 'manifestations of the kinds of hidden local, day-to-day and passive resistance appropriate to the conditions of American slave plantations [and] Southern Rhodesian mining compounds' were common on Nyasaland tea estates during the 1930s.[42] But evidence of more overt action in Blantyre is very largely lacking prior to the ending of the Second World War when labour shortages and inflation provided the potent combination out of which the labour movement was to grow.

The emergence of an authentic urban-based workers' movement may be dated from October 1945 when members of the recently established Nyasaland Teachers' Association met in Blantyre to press for higher wages.[43] Little appears to have been achieved at this meeting but, in 1946, 'there were symptoms of dissatisfaction among labour' caused, it was said, 'by the rise in the cost of living'.[44] And over the next two years a series of further protests took place, involving transport workers, domestic servants and council workers among others, and demonstrating the growth of group solidarity.

As in neighbouring Tanganyika, domestic servants were among the earliest to act. In 1946, they solicited the support of the Blantyre branch of the Nyasaland African Congress in order to press their case with European employers. Calls were made for a significant increase in the wage rate to bring it closer into line with wages in Southern Rhodesia, where many Nyasa servants had worked, and demands were made that long-service workers should receive pensions or gratuities. Mr Solijoli, a cook, complained 'that we are not treated as human beings'; Mohomed Matola noted 'that we work from 4 or 4.30 a.m. up to 8 or 9.30 p.m. daily, yet our pay is too little'. James Gunde added: 'Our maize and everything is where we are employed because we have no time to go home to open garden and to feed our family'. Moses Sangala returned to the basic question: 'Why Nyasaland servants cannot get better pay? Every servant in Rhodesia is better paid.'[45] The threat of strike action was openly employed, though in the event neither domestic servants nor the leaders of Congress were prepared to risk confrontation. Using the excuse that 'we have not enough time and it is difficult to meet', the domestic servants' leaders rejected suggestions from Congress that they should form a union. In the absence of such a body, the Congress President, Charles Matinga, was unwilling to push the issue to a showdown. By September 1946, he was boasting that it was through his conciliatory advice that a strike by servants had been averted.[46]

While domestic servants talked, Blantyre's night soil workers acted. A despised group, only a few dozen strong in comparison with the more than 1,000 servants employed in the town in the late 1940s, night soil workers were responsible for maintaining Blantyre's antiquated waste disposal

[41] Governor, Nyasaland to Colonial Secretary, 20 June 1928, PRO CO 525/125.

[42] Robin Palmer, 'Working conditions and worker responses on Nyasaland tea estates, 1930–1953', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XXVII (1986), 119.

[43] Minutes of a meeting of the Nyasaland Teachers' Association, 7 Oct. 1945, MNA NSB 3/3/6.

[44] *Annual Report of the Nyasaland Labour Department for 1946*.

[45] Meetings of the Nyasaland African Congress, Blantyre branch, with domestic servants, 23 Mar. and 2 June 1946, MNA NS 1/3/10.

[46] Charles Matinga, President's Address to the 3rd Conference of the Nyasaland African Congress, 23 Sept. 1946, MNA PCC 1/4/1.

system – made use of in European residential areas as well as in African – which depended on the daily emptying of buckets.[47] When they went on strike in May 1947 demanding increased wages, protective clothing and an additional soap ration, the Council was stung into action. Within a day wages had been increased to a modest 18s 6d a month and it had been agreed that soap would be issued weekly rather than monthly. As waterproof coats were expensive, the Council, with characteristic miserliness, ruled that they would not be allowed.[48] But this decision was rescinded in 1951 when following the threat of a further strike, wages for night soil workers were increased to 35s and mackintoshes were finally provided.[49]

As in many parts of Africa, transport workers were at the heart of Blantyre's labour movement, though fundamental distinctions existed between freebooting, entrepreneurial lorry drivers, often residents of Ndirande, and the railway workers who constituted the core of Blantyre's proletariat. The presence of railwaymen as the largest occupational group in Blantyre dates from 1907 when the Shire Highlands Railway Company (renamed in 1930 the Nyasaland Railway Company) established its headquarters and major workshops at Limbe. In the late 1940s it employed about 4,800 men, the majority of whom were housed with their wives and children in the large company location opened at Mpingwe in 1947 and extended in subsequent years.[50] Railwaymen were thus in a very different position from the majority of wage-earners in Blantyre who retained regular access to land and lived in Ndirande or in peri-urban villages up to 12 miles from the town.

Like workers elsewhere, they were affected by the Company's racially segmented recruitment policy under which Europeans, Asians, Coloureds, Mauritians and Africans were employed on separate wage scales and under separate conditions of employment.[51] However, they had the advantage over black railway workers in the Rhodesias that the proportion of non-African workers employed was comparatively small (approximately 1:16 as compared to less than 1:3 in Southern Rhodesia in 1957).[52] In consequence, a number of skilled jobs barred to Africans on the Rhodesian railways, notably those of driver and fireman, were filled by African railwaymen in Nyasaland. Significant differentiation accordingly existed among Malawian railway workers, who were divided in 1955 into 3,200 low-paid unskilled workers, 300 clerks and 850 artisans, including drivers, senior foremen and firemen, some of whom by this time were earning up to 23s 6d a day – more than twenty times as much as many of their fellow railwaymen.[53]

[47] For a vivid description of the operation of sewage disposal in Blantyre, see Morton, *Just the Job*, 244–6. By 1957, the number of domestic servants in and around Blantyre was estimated at 3,500. David G. Bettison, 'The private domestic servant in Blantyre–Limbe', *Nyasaland Journal*, XII 1 (1959), 36.

[48] Blantyre Town Council Minutes, 22 May 1947, MNA BL 2/1/1/13.

[49] Blantyre Town Council Minutes, 23 Apr. 1951, MNA BL 2/1/1/14.

[50] Blantyre District Annual Report for 1947, MNA NS 3/1/4; *Annual Reports of the Labour Department for 1947 and 1949*; *Report of an Economic Survey of Nyasaland* 1958–59 (Salisbury, 1959), 75.

[51] H. W. Stevens to W. M. Codrington, 7 Jan. 1959, Malawi Railway Archives.

[52] *Report of an Economic Survey of Nyasaland, 1958–59*, 75; Thomas M. Franck, *Race and Nationalism. The Struggle for Power in Rhodesia-Nyasaland* (London, 1960), 156.

[53] *Annual Report of the Nyasaland Labour Department, 1955*, 18.

The existence of this relatively small group of skilled workers, many of them former apprentices with more than five years on the railway, was an important factor in the development of the labour movement in the 1940s. Trouble broke out in February 1946, four months after a strike on the Rhodesian railways, and no doubt in part in imitation of it, when African drivers and firemen took advantage of their crucial strategic position to press the management for a substantial rise in wages.[54] In June, they were at it again, using the machinery of the newly-formed Railway African Staff Association to press for the ending of the colour bar; this was followed in February 1947 by the threat of a general strike, averted only by the promise that a further increase in wages would be given.[55] Conflicts emerged, however, between artisans and unskilled workers, with the workers in the lower grades repudiating the leadership of 'so-called representatives' who, they claimed, 'were not empowered to act on behalf of all the African staff.'[56] And these divisions continued after the management, in 1950, officially recognized the African Railways Staff Association as the body representing railway workers. Aggrieved at the rising cost of living, workers held a meeting at the Mpingwe compound on February 24 1951 at which they subjected the General Manager, Mr Branfill, to a series of criticisms, called for a doubling of wages across the board as from 1 January and threatened to strike if their requests were not met.[57] However, no mention of these demands or threats was communicated to management by D. B. Ndovi, the Vice-Chairman and chief negotiator of the Staff Association, who compounded the problem by agreeing to a settlement that provided nothing at all to 30 per cent of the workers – those in the lower grades – and only modest gains to the rest.[58] Ndovi's dismissal by management for what were said to be 'other disciplinary grounds' therefore went largely unremarked by rank-and-file workers, who over the next few years retreated into inaction.

Even the foundation in 1954 of the Nyasaland Railway African Workers' Union did not provide them with an effective or representative institution. Two years later, the Protectorate's Labour Officer noted that it was still not properly organized; by 1957 it had attracted only 1,000 paid-up members out of an African staff of over 6,000.[59] In that year its secretary underwent a three-month study course in Japan under the auspices of the Federation of Democratic Youth – the first indication of the internationalization of trade union activities in Malawi. No organizational benefits appear to have percolated down to the members.

The repeated attempts to develop links of worker solidarity among railwaymen may be compared with the more politically astute yet individualistic action of Blantyre's motor drivers and mechanics under the leadership of Lawrence Makata and Lali Lubani, the most prominent representatives of the new urban culture that emerged in Blantyre–Limbe in the 1940s and 1950s. A man of exceptional energy and shrewdness, Makata

[54] *Annual Report of the Labour Department, 1946*, 6.

[55] C. D. James, 'On behalf of the railway African staff' to General Manager, Associated Railways, 5 Feb. 1947, MNA NSB 3/3/6; Annual Report on Blantyre District for 1947, MNA NS 3/1/4.

[56] *Annual Report of the Labour Department for 1947*.

[57] Nyasaland Political Intelligence Report for Feb. 1951, PRO CO 537/7231.

[58] Nyasaland Political Intelligence Report for Mar. 1951, PRO CO 537/7231.

[59] *Annual Reports of the Labour Department for 1956 and 1957*.

was born in 1916 into one of the leading Yao lineages in the Ndirande area.[60] Turning his back on mission education, an important route to influence for many of his kinsmen, he left school early and joined Hall's Garage in Blantyre as a driver and mechanic, at a time when lorries were eliminating head porterage as the main means of transport in the country.[61] His subsequent career demonstrates the rewards to be obtained from combining hereditary influence at the village level with mastery of the new skills and opportunities associated with lorry driving.

During the Second World War, Makata carried goods (some of them smuggled) between Blantyre and Salisbury. Later he reacted to the post-war expansion of the transport business, occasioned partly by the introduction of a territory-wide bus service, by getting together in 1947 with his fellow Yao lorry driver, Lali Lubani, to found the Nyasaland African Drivers Association.[62] Some drivers and mechanics were recruited from Conforzi's Tea and Tobacco company at Cholo where they had recently taken part in a strike;[63] most, however, worked in Blantyre–Limbe, the transport capital of Malawi and home of the recently founded Nyasaland Transport Company as well as of several garages and the Tobacco Auction houses. Dues were set at 5s for entry plus 12s annual fees – a high rate designed to discourage all but skilled workers in the industry.[64] Lubani, the chairman, affiliated the association to the Nyasaland African Congress and spoke at the fourth annual meeting in September 1947, calling on the government to arrange a minimum wage for drivers, commensurate with their skills.[65] The next year, the appeal of the association was widened by the replacement of 'Drivers' by 'Workers' in the title; a year later, in 1949, it was officially registered as Nyasaland's first trade union.[66] Numbers were kept deliberately small, rising to only 255 by 1957. But their strategic importance was such that employers in the transport business founded a parallel organization in the same year, 'to enforce the adoption of a uniform scale of wages and of time and overtime in every branch of the business' and to defend 'the interests of its members against combination of workmen'.[67]

Historians have noted the tendency over much of Africa in the post-war period for labour leaders to be ideologically populist and socially ambiguous, supporters of worker solidarity on the one hand but with a strong belief in

[60] See D. G. Bettison and R. J. Apthorpe, 'Authority and residence in a peri-urban social structure: Ndirande, Nyasaland', *Nyasaland Journal*, XIV (1961), 11–12.

[61] My account of Makata is informed both by the fascinating obituary of him written by Orton Chirwa, the founder of the Malawi Congress Party, in the *Malawi News*, 19 Apr. 1962, and by the information provided in Power, 'African entrepreneurship in Blantyre and Limbe'.

[62] L. L. Lubani for Lawrence Makata (Secretary), Nyasaland African Divers Association, 5 Aug. 1947, MNA NSB 3/3/6.

[63] Annual Report on the Southern Province for 1947, MNA NS 3/1/12.

[64] Constitution of the Nyasaland African Drivers' Association, 1947, MNA NSB 3/3/6.

[65] Records of the 4th Annual Meeting of the Nyasaland African Congress, 22–26 Sept. 1947, MNA PCC 1/4/1.

[66] *Annual Report of the Labour Department*, *1949*.

[67] Provincial Labour Officer to PC, Southern Province, 13 Nov. 1948, MNA NSB 3/3/6.

individual advancement on the other.[68] In Blantyre, however, these tendencies were taken to extremes.For lorry drivers like Makata, Lubani and James Mpungu, a fellow founder of the African Transport Workers Association and also the founder of his own canteen business, combination was a means rather than an end – the end being the furthering of their own economic interests through strategies which involved the mobilization of networks of dependents. In 1948, while still secretary of the association, Makata made the transition from wage earner to entrepreneur by purchasing a lorry which he used for selling firewood in Blantyre. 'He was so successful in this enterprise', according to his friend and political ally, Orton Chirwa, 'that he soon bought four more lorries and entered fully into the general transport business.'[69]

His business then grew by leaps and bounds. He built maize machines, started brick-making, timber works and so on. By 1952 his operations extended to such things as bus and taxi services between Ndirande and Blantyre. He became well known throughout the country as the famous Makata and Sons Ltd. He opened five milling machines, a fabulous bar at Lilongwe, a garage; his properties throughout the Southern and Central Provinces were worth thousands of pounds. He was the king of all African businessmen.

Yet, like self-made businessmen elsewhere, Makata's success was insecure and he looked constantly for means to give it firmer foundations. One strategy he adopted in 1953 was to challenge European and Asian economic dominance by creating an African Chamber of Commerce, along with a dozen or more other self-employed businessmen, several of whom had also been involved in the Motor Drivers' Association only a couple of years earlier.[70] Another was to develop elaborate ties of patronage with members of Blantyre's urban poor through the provision of credit on relatively easy terms and through the loan of lorries to mourners seeking transport to funerals. He also sponsored a primary school in Ndirande and revived the Ndirande Welfare Club (founded in 1933 as a joint venture of the Blantyre mission and the urban elite) as 'a club run by Africans themselves', and as a focus for political agitation.[71]

One of his key henchmen in all these activities was Lali Lubani, the first Chairman of the Motor Drivers' Association and, by the early 1950s, a fellow transporter and store-keeper. Another was the remarkable Hartwell Solomon, Makata's successor as Secretary of the Motor Workers Union, who combined a fine line in Marxist rhetoric with part-ownership of a mobile cinema and a stake in a furniture factory.[72] Such men were representative of a new type of urban leadership, developed in the work place, or at least in the

[68] For a useful discussion, see Bill Freund, *The African Worker* (Cambridge, 1988), 91–109.

[69] Obituary of L. M. Makata by O. E. Ching'oli Chirwa, *Malawi News*, 19 Apr. 1962.

[70] Nyasaland Political Intelligence Report for Nov. 1953, PRO CO 1015/455.

[71] Power, 'African entrepreneurship', 293–4, 250, 286–7; Minutes of a General Meeting of the Ndirande Welfare Club, 15 June 1941; James F. Sangala to DC, Blantyre, 21 June 1947, MNA NSB 3/3/5.

[72] Minutes of a meeting of the Blantyre branch of the Nyasaland African Motor Transport Workers, 25–26 September 1948, MNA NSB 3/3/6; Nyasaland Political Intelligence Report for Oct. 1949, PRO CO 537/4725; Power, 'African entrepreneurship', 320.

driver's cab, and owing little to mission education, the major source of inspiration to an earlier generation of predomiantly rural-based Malawian politicians.

POLITICS IN BLANTYRE: WORKERS AND NATIONALISTS

No one factor can explain the shift in the character of Blantyre's labour movement that took place from the mid-1950s. Changing economic circumstances no doubt had their part to play. Wages remained 'conspicuously low', as the Colonial Office noted in 1957.[73] But with food prices in the township market rising only very slightly between 1953 and 1958, as is demonstrated in the table below, the substantial increase in the minimum daily wages in Blantyre from 10d in 1952, to 16d in 1955, 24d in 1957 and 30d in 1959 almost certainly involved a real increase in living standards for workers in employment, though from a very low base.[74]

Table 1. *Food prices in township markets*

	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958
Meat (per lb)	12–15d	12–15d	18d	21d	24d
Fish (each)	9–12d	6–12d	6–12d	4–12d	4–12d
Eggs (dozen)	18d	24d	24–30d	24–30d	24–48d
Sugar (per lb)	8–9d	8d	8–9d	8–9d	8d
Maize flour (lb)	2.5–3d	2.5–3d	2.5d	2.5d	3d

Job insecurity, however, which had been at a relatively low level in the late 1940s, when labour was in short supply, grew very markedly following the downturn in the economy from 1957, the loss of jobs and, for the first time in Malawi's urban history, the growth of substantial unemployment – noted by the Labour Department each year from 1958 to 1961.[75] This in turn interacted with the more intrusive involvement of the state in the contentious areas of housing and racial segregation to arouse resentment among entrepreneurs and workers alike. If metropolitan directives had been heeded, segregation would have become a less abrasive factor in urban life by the 1950s but, in fact, for many Malawians it grew more irksome. On at least four occasions between 1949 and 1953, the Blantyre and Limbe town councils rejected government requests to abandon the curfew imposed on Africans, only giving way reluctantly in March 1954 after the police had made clear

[73] J. C. Morgan to Sir Robert Armitage, 12 July 1957, MNA SMP/23050/77 quoted in Iliffe, 'Poor in the modern history of Malawi', 124.

[74] Figures calculated from *Annual Reports of the Labour Department 1952 to 1960*. See also David G. Bettison, 'The poverty datum line in Central Africa', *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, xxvii (1960). This notes that wages in Blantyre were somewhat less than half those in Salisbury in the late 1950s, but that food prices were nearly half as cheap. Overall, however: 'the average wage is in each case well below the cost of goods and services required to keep a family in health and decency'. [4–5]

[75] *Labour Department Reports for* 1958–1961; Chipeta, 'Labour in a colonial context', 450.

that in their opinion 'such an amendment would not make any appreciable difference in the number of burglaries in the Township'.[76]

Even then, however, housing policy continued on segregationist lines. Convinced that the councils lacked the ability to overcome the acute shortage of African housing that afflicted Blantyre during the post-war period, the government took over responsibility from the early 1950s and commissioned a comprehensive Town Plan. As Power has noted, the plan unveiled in 1951 continued the practice of racial zoning through the demarcation of the town into high, medium and low density areas.[77] By 1955–6 more than a thousand houses were being constructed for African government employees at the locations opened at Soche and Naperi.[78] But, at the same time, active steps were taken to destroy the lively settlement of independent householders, businessmen, prostitutes and pimps that had grown up along the main road at Chichiri, now designated an industrial zone. Evictions continued sporadically up to 1959 in the face of protests from African householders, reaching a climax during the state of emergency in March when Rhodesian troops were employed to destroy a squatters' colony in the vicinity of the Rangeley Stadium.[79]

If economic change, bringing in its wake unemployment and greater government intervention, was a factor in the second wave of worker militancy from 1958, so too was the rising tide of nationalism which swept Nyasaland towards independence between 1956 and 1964. Urban involvement in nationalist politics goes back to 1943 when James Sangala called meetings of 'the community of both Blantyre and Limbe Townships … to discuss the formation of an Association which should be represented by all the Africans resident in Nyasaland'.[80] Worker associations were encouraged to affiliate themselves to Congress and from 1946 worker grievances were frequently aired, despite the Governor's warning against civil servants meddling in labour disputes.[81] Partly in consequence, Congress under Charles Matinga was decidedly lukewarm in the support given to domestic servants seeking higher wages in 1946 with the result that, where workers were successful in pushing their claims in the late 1940s and early 1950s, they tended to act without reference to the politicians.

However, several labour leaders in Blantyre were also active members of the local Congress branch, among them Lali Lubani who was still chairman of the African Motor Transport Workers Union in 1952 despite having made the transition from wage earner to self-employed businessman four years earlier.[82] He and Hartwell Solomon were among the Blantyre delegates

[76] Blantyre Town Council minutes, 15 Aug. 1949, 14 Jan. 1952, 27 Mar. 1952, 26 Jan. 1953, 12 Oct. 1953, 8 Mar. 1954, MNA BL 2/1/1/14 and 2/1/1/15.

[77] Power, 'African entrepreneurship in Blantyre and Limbe', 3–4 and 311–12.

[78] *Annual Report of the Labour Department*, *1955*; *Annual Reports of the Public Works Department*, *1955–6*.

[79] Southern Province Operations Diary, entry for 8 Mar. 1949, Rhodes House Library, Devlin Commission Papers, Box 9.

[80] James F. Sangala to All Africans resident in Nyasaland Protectorate, 1 Oct. 1943, MNA NSB 3/3/6.

[81] Acting Governor's speech to the Nyasaland African Congress, 22 Sept. 1947, MNA PCC/1/4/1.

[82] Nyasaland Political Intelligence Report for Sept. 1952, PRO CO 1015/464.

appointed by Congress to organize a general strike in protest against the introduction of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1953. But it is indicative of the caution displayed by urban workers that no such strike took place and that labour relations in Blantyre remained unaffected by the stoppages and disturbances involving independent peasants and estate workers which convulsed the Shire Highlands and the Lower Shire Valley in August and September.[83] Three years later, Wellington Manoah Chirwa, the articulate Federal M.P., was reported as 'having recently been interesting himself in the Nyasaland African Railway Workers' Union'. But it was noted by the Special Branch that 'until the Unions develop and gain the support of the majority of the workers, it is unlikely that Congress will attempt to achieve its aims through this medium.'[84]

The upturn in labour activity from 1958 took place at a number of levels. Trade union membership increased from the low figure of 1,300 in 1957 to 3,400 in 1958, 7,000 in 1960 and approximately 13,000 in 1962, before falling rapidly in the 18 months leading up to independence.[85] The expansion of the Railway Workers Union was comparatively modest – from 2,100 paid-up members in 1958 to 4,000 in 1963. However, much greater increases were recorded for the other major unions: the Commercial and General African Workers Union which expanded from a mere 150 members in 1957 to over 1,000 in 1958, and the African Motor Transport Workers Union which changed its name to the Transport and Allied Workers Union in 1959 and increased its membership from 660 in that year to over 4,000 in 1960. New, more radical, union leaders emerged, the most important being C. C. M. Msisia and Susgo Msiska, Chairman and General Secretary respectively of the Transport and Allied Workers Union, and Chakufwa Chihana (today the Chairman of the opposition party, AFORD) who became Acting General Secretary of the General and Commercial Workers Union in 1960 at the youthful age of 21.[86]

There was also an increase in the scale, intensity and number of industrial disputes recorded: from nine minor stoppages in 1955 to three trade disputes and 15 strikes in 1958 and on to 81 disputes, 77 involving strikes, in 1960, the year of greatest industrial confrontation in Malawi prior to 1992. According to official figures, the three largest stoppages involved 610 employees of the Nyasaland Transport Company, 4,000 railwaymen, and 5,100 workers employed in the tea factory and on the tea estates owned by Conforzi Ltd.[87] The first of these disputes was settled in a week in the workers' favour; the two others, however, were protracted affairs, placing great strains on worker solidarity and lasting for 15 and 51 days respectively. In several of the strikes, the influence of the new strand of radical unionism, as represented by the Transport and Allied Workers Union, was clearly visible. But others, most notably the railwaymen's strike, were examples of popular workers' move-

[83] Nyasaland Political Intelligence Reports, May–Sept. 1953, PRO CO 1015/464 and CO 1015/465.

[84] Nyasaland Political Intelligence Report for Apr. 1956, PRO CO 1015/961.

[85] Figures drawn from *Annual Labour Reports, 1957 and 1960*; Monthly Intelligence Report for Feb. 1963, PRO DO 183/136. The author of this report calculated that only about 10 per cent of the workers in the industries represented were members of unions.

[86] For Chihana, see *Malawi News*, 29 June 1961.

[87] *Annual Report of the Labour Department, 1960*.

ments, controlled by rank-and-file employees and owing little or nothing to official trade unions or even, directly, to the intervention of Congress.[88]

Between 1958 and 1964, businessmen, trade unionists and nationalist politicians in Blantyre were involved in a complex struggle for power. The role of businessmen is particularly worthy of study. Because their lack of formal education disqualified them in Dr Banda's eyes from being selected as MCP candidates for the 1961 elections, Lali Lubani and Lawrence Makata have been almost entirely ignored in accounts of Malawian nationalism. Yet they and other businessmen played an active and influential role in the movement, not just as members of Banda's Executive Committee from August 1958, but even more as Congress's principal financial backers and as urban power-brokers, linking the party to the urban poor and providing cars and lorries to transport members to meetings.[89]

The risks they took were starkly demonstrated in 1959 when Makata's business collapsed during the ten months he spent in detention. But the rewards on offer were strikingly demonstrated following the elections of 1961, when Dr Banda moved rapidly to dissolve the lucrative European monopoly over the transport of crops handled by the Agricultural Production and Marketing Board. Richard Chidzanja, a Lilongwe-based lorry owner and MCP organizer, joined Gwanda Chakuamba and Alec Nyasula as Banda's nominees on the Board; through their efforts, African businessmen by May 1962 had been given licences to transport virtually all tobacco sold through the Board in the Southern Province, as well as 50 per cent of the tobacco sold from the Northern Division.[90] Lawrence Makata, however, was not among their number. For Makata, Blantyre's mayor designate, had died in a motor accident in April, his business still not yet fully restored, leaving others to reap where he had sown.

In a recent article, Tony Woods has argued 'that the Malawi Congress Party and its agents not only set the stage for industrial action in the late 1950s and early 1960s but also actively encouraged a more radical class consciousness among rail and other industrial workers.'[91] The claim is justified in the narrow sense that the newly emergent Blantyre 'crowd', overwhelmingly young and predominantly though not exclusively male, demonstrated from 1958 an urban-based politicised militancy of a type that had not existed previously in Malawi.[92] Time and again, between October 1958 and March 1959, crowds of young people who had attended political meetings in Ndirande made their way through the town 'shouting political slogans, jeering at and abusing Europeans and Asians', sometimes stoning

[88] McCracken, 'Labour in Nyasaland', 279–90.

[89] Obituary of Makata by Orton Chirwa, *Malawi News*, 19 Apr. 1962; Statement by Thomas Andrew Karua to the Special Branch, 1959, RHL Devlin Commission Papers, Box 6. It is an indication of Makata's influence that his fellow-detainees in Kanjedza Camp made him their spokesman. Almost the only reference to Makata and Lubani in published accounts comes in the Devlin Report (*Report of the Nyasaland Commission of Enquiry*, Cmnd. 814 [London, 1959]) 26, where they are disparagingly described as 'two elderly businessmen'. (In fact, they were in their early forties at the time.)

[90] *Malawi News*, 2 Nov. 1961, 10 May 1962; *Proceedings of the 3rd Meeting of the 76th Session of the Nyasaland Legislative Council*, 6–7 Mar. 1962, 154–7.

[91] Woods, 'Rail workers in Malawi', 728.

[92] The role of women in nationalist politics is considered in some detail in my forthcoming study, *Malawi under the British*.

cars, and in general demonstrating the anger of a poor and marginalised group, some of whose members had only recently been made unemployed.[93]

Yet, while there can be no denying the widespread urban support for Congress by 1959, this is not to say that workers and union officials identified fully with the party. Friction arose as early as January 1959 when Congress activists called for the removal of Weston Chisiza as General Secretary of the Nyasaland Trade Union Congress, founded in 1956, on the grounds that he was insufficiently radical.[94] Both sides co-operated over the next few weeks as Congress laid plans for a general strike involving civil servants, railwaymen and transport workers. But when the government declared a state of emergency and arrested several hundred Congress leaders on March 3, the reluctance of workers to take industrial action for purely political ends became apparent. During the first 24 hours, workers in several parts of the city vented their anger by going on strike, building road blocks and stoning or burning cars.[95] But a day later employees began to trickle back to work, and on 5 March the Railway Workers Union quietly instructed its members to return.[96] On 6 March the atmosphere in Blantyre was said to be still 'rather tense and unsettled'. But the Governor noted that 'labour in urban areas [is] now reported normal and clerical and other staff have returned to work.'[97] Thereafter Blantyre lapsed into an uneasy calm, thus permitting the security forces to concentrate their attention on the Northern Province where peasant resistance continued unabated.

The founding of the Malawi Congress Party in September 1959 marks the beginning of the most intense phase in the history of party–union relations. In the initial period, up to April 1960, Aleke Banda, the 21 year-old co-founder of the Party, was principally concerned with bringing the unions affiliated to the NTUC into the anti-colonial struggle. Some support was received from C. C. M. Msisia of the Transport and Allied Workers Union who declared that the 'Trade Union movement … [is] indissolubly linked up with the struggle for the political freedom … of our continent'.[98] But Weston Chisiza, the General Secretary of the NTUC, was not prepared to subordinate his organization to another's will, particularly if this put at risk the considerable funds he was now receiving from the American-based International Federation of Free Trade Unions and from the British Trades Union Congress.[99] Relations between the MCP and the NTUC therefore deteriorated, culminating in a public attack on the trade union leadership launched by Aleke Banda in the *Malawi News* in May and June 1960.[100] This

[93] Political Intelligence Report, 1958, PRO CO 1015/1749; P. F. Wilson, 'Events leading up to the declaration of a State of Emergency in Nyasaland on March 3 1959', RHL, Devlin Commission Papers, Box 9.

[94] Special Branch memo on 'The Emergency Conference of the Nyasaland African Conference', 13 Feb. 1959, RHL, Devlin Commission Papers, Box 6.

[95] Operations Control Diary, 3 Mar. 1959, RHL, Devlin Commission Papers, Box 9.

[96] *Ibid*, 5 Mar. 1959.

[97] Governor, Zomba to Federal Prime Minister, Salisbury, 6 Mar. 1959, Zimbabwe National Archives, F 236 CX 27/3/1.

[98] *Malawi News*, 22 Oct. 1960, quoted in Woods, 'Rail workers in Malawi', 731.

[99] H. W. Stevens to R. A. Short, 27 Aug. 1959, MRA; *Malawi News*, 4 June 1960.

[100] *Malawi News*, 7 May and 4 June 1960.

no doubt played a part in the founding by C. C. M. Msisia of the rival National Council of Labour in October 1960, and in the eventual removal of Chisiza from office in an internal coup in Spring 1961.

The Byzantine manoeuvring of trade union leaders can be contrasted with the upsurge of worker militancy from below that took place in southern Malawi in 1960. At one level, the series of stoppages involving motor transport workers, railwaymen and estate workers can be seen as a single movement demonstrating the unusual opportunities arising for workers in a political environment that had been changed beyond recognition by the release of Dr Banda from Gwelo Gaol in April and by the crisis of state authority that followed.

For railwaymen, however, among whom the sense of worker consciousness was at it's strongest, the crucial feature was the extent to which ordinary workers took control of their own affairs with little or no support either from the officially recognized union or from the MCP. By a deliberate decision of the workers, the discredited leadership of the Railway African Workers Union was excluded from negotiations during the disciplined, two week long strike involving over 4,000 men that closed down Nyasaland's railways in November 1960.[101] Instead the strikers resorted to what Iliffe has described as an 'anonymous, ostensibly leaderless type' of action in which they systematically refused to send representatives to negotiate with the company on the grounds that in the past 'anybody who has stood up to Management ... was believed to have been either dismissed or promoted or transferred to some unpleasant spot where he could be no bother' – charges accepted by the Acting Manager as being broadly correct.[102] Not until the management had backed down by agreeing to the appointment of a Tribunal of Inquiry did the strikers come together in a mass meeting as members of the union. And when they did, they dismissed the whole committee of the Nyasaland Railway African Workers' Union and elected a new committee drawn from leaders of the strike.[103]

Equally detached was the leadership of the Malawi Congress Party, now preoccupied with maintaining industrial harmony in the run up to the 1961 elections. Government officials perhaps over-simplified the situation by arguing of the strike 'that there was no evidence whatever of instigation by any political party'.[104] But although a handful of members of the Malawi Youth League were active, so the General Manager claimed, in preventing people returning to work, leaders of the party kept their distance[105] H. B. M. Chipembere and Dundzu Chisiza refused to intervene when approached by strikers anxious to break the deadlock. And although Orton Chirwa offered his assistance, it was with the aim of bringing the strike to an end.[106] By late November, MCP leaders were being openly described as 'Capricorns' by disillusioned railwaymen, who preferred to put their trust in the one external

[101] For a detailed analysis of this strike, see McCracken, 'Labour in Nyasaland'.

[102] John Iliffe, 'Wage labour and urbanisation', in M. H. Y. Kaniki (ed.), *Tanzania under Colonial Rule* (London, 1980), 286–87; B. M. Strouts to E. A. Short, 20 Nov. 1960, MRA.

[103] Strouts to Short, 23 Nov. 1960, MRA.

[104] Memo handed to Lord Rupert Nevill by Lord Perth, 25 Nov. 1960, MRA.

[105] Strouts to Short, 18–20 Nov. 1960, MRA.

[106] Woods, 'Rail workers in Malawi', 731–2.

'agitator' of substance to have approached them – C. C. M. Msisya, the ambitious chairman of the National Council of Labour.[107]

The year 1960 marked at once the high point of the labour movement and the beginning of its rapid decline. With the MCP moving from a position of limited and largely rhetorical support for worker interests to one which gave priority to the control of wages, labour leaders were confronted with a difficult choice. One response, followed by Stewart Nkholokosa, the former guard who became Secretary General of the African Railway Workers' Union in the aftermath of the 1960 strike, was to seek an accommodation with the Congress Party. An astute campaigner, Nkolokosa in March 1962 exploited regional rivalries to oust the northerner Kelvin Nyirenda from the General Secretaryship of the Nyasaland Trade Union Congress.[108] Thereafter he resisted a series of challenges to his position by giving his unswerving support to Party policies, even when, as with the Trade Union (Amendment) Ordinance of 1963, they involved an assault on the independence of the trade union movement.[109]

Suzgo Msiska and Chakufwa Chihana took the alternative approach. General Secretaries respectively of the Transport and Allied Workers Union and of the Commercial and General Workers Union, both men committed themselves to a radical position involving the defence of workers' rights even when this conflicted with the wishes of the Party.[110] Conflict came as early as September 1961, within weeks of the nationalists' success in the August elections, when Msiska called out on strike more than 800 workers in Blantyre's motor transport industry in a demand for higher wages. On 14 September, the *Malawi News*, the official organ of the MCP, condemned the strike, which collapsed within a few days once the workers were made aware that they lacked political support.[111] Msiska led his supporters in a furious demonstration to the head office of the MCP only to have his complaints firmly rejected.[112] In June 1962, he and Chihana became the first individuals to be suspended from membership of the MCP, an action that was eventually to bring their labour careers in Malawi to a close.[113] Both men were initially successful in rallying support from their members but at a time when the MCP was moving from one political triumph to another, their fate had been effectively sealed.[114]

With considerable courage, the labour leaders rejected a diatribe launched against them by Dr Banda in August and resisted repeated attempts to expel them from office.[115] Government disapproval mounted, however, from February 1963 when they came out in public opposition to the Trade Union (Amendment) Ordinance, which threatened the independence of the unions. This time they had no means of defence.[116] Deserted by a substantial portion

[107] Woods, 'Rail workers in Malawi', 731–2; McCracken, 'Labour in Nyasaland', 283. Among politically active Central Africans in the 1950s, 'Capricorn' was synonymous with 'stooge' or 'sellout'. [108] Monthly Intelligence Report, March 1962, DO 183/136.

[109] Monthly Intelligence Reports, Oct. 1962, Feb. 1963, PRO DO 183/136.

[110] For a useful introduction, see Philip Short, *Banda* (London, 1974), 156–57.

[111] *Malawi News*, 14, 21 Sept. 1961. [112] *Malawi News*, 28 Sept. 1961.

[113] *Malawi News*, 29 June 1962; Monthly Intelligence Report, June 1962, PRO DO 183/136. [114] Monthly Intelligence Report, July 1962, PRO DO 183/136.

[115] Monthly Intelligence Report, Aug. 1962, PRO DO 183/136.

[116] Monthly Intelligence Reports, Feb., March, April 1963, PRO DO 183/136.

of the members of the Transport and Allied Workers Union, Chisiza resigned as Secretary-General in May and a year later left Blantyre for Moscow.[117] Chafukwa Chihana remained in office up to the end of January 1964 when he too resigned, to the disappointment of most members of his union who were said to have regretted 'the loss of an individual who, they consider, had worked so hard on their behalf'.[118] Meanwhile, confidence in the leaders of the NTUC had slumped, 'since it is believed by the rank and file that they dare do nothing in opposition to the Government's employment and wages policy', and there had been a sharp fall in union membership.[119]

As Woods has demonstrated, railwaymen at the Limbe yards continued to demonstrate their discontent through a variety of overt and covert means.[120] But with the trade union movement now firmly subordinated to the Party, the room for independent labour action was limited. Not until the collapse of the Banda regime from 1992 would an effective workers' movement re-emerge in Blantyre.

CONCLUSION

In the two decades between the ending of the Second World War and the transfer of political power in 1964, Blantyre's population increased nearly ten-fold. Yet the city that witnessed independence still retained many of the features that had shaped the character of the colonial town. There was still the contrast between the small minority of workers housed within the city in government or employers' locations and the great majority who walked in from villages, ten per cent of them even in 1957 ten miles or more away.[121] Most inhabitants still remained trapped in a web of stifling poverty; most still suffered from starvation wages which probably increased slightly in real terms from a very low level in the decade up to 1963 but then fell by as much as 30 per cent by 1977.[122]

Segregation at an economic level persisted through the continued dominance of the European and Asian sector over African businesses. But continuity here was combined with significant change in that, with independence, privileged African businessmen were able to use their access to state power in order to enhance their economic position. In that sense, the success of African transporter/politicians like Richard Chidzanja, from 1962, was to be an important indication of later developments.

As for the labour movement, two conclusions can be drawn from the events of 1958 to 1963: the first, that in those years a popular workers' movement was born and the second, that it was a movement heavily dependent on external forces for any impact that it was able to exert. Among railwaymen in particular a strong sense of worker consciousness manifested

[117] *Malawi News*, 17 May 1963; Monthly Intelligence Reports, May 1963, DO 183/136 and May 1964, DO 183/137.

[118] Monthly Intelligence Report, Feb. 1964, PRO DO 183/137.

[119] Monthly Intelligence Reports, Aug., Sept., 1963, PRO DO 183/136.

[120] Woods, 'Rail workers in Malawi', 737–8.

[121] *Annual Report of the Labour Department, 1957*.

[122] Iliffe, 'Poor in the modern history of Malawi', 276; Dharam Ghai and Samir Radwan, 'Growth and inequality: rural development in Malawi, 1964–78', in D. Ghai and S. Radwan (eds.), *Agrarian Policies and Rural Poverty in Africa* (Geneva, 1983), 90.

itself in the successful strike of 1960. But workers were too weak and trade union leaders too divided and ineffective for this sense of common purpose to be translated into positive results once Dr Banda had come to power. Only towards the end of his long period of rule were the conditions to arise that would allow workers in Blantyre to take large-scale action again.[123]

SUMMARY

This article seeks to relate the character and changing circumstances of Blantyre–Limbe from the 1940s to the post-war emergence of a labour movement in the town and its tangled relationship with Malawian nationalism. Blantyre from its origins was a radically segregated town, organised on South African lines, but providing housing in locations for only a small proportion of the workers employed. Most workers, in consequence, were non-migrants, living in villages fringing the town that were relatively free from colonial control. Most of the villagers were exceptionally poor but a minority seized the opportunity the expansion of markets provided to become self-employed businessmen.

It is argued that these features influenced the character of the labour movement which developed in the late 1940s, a time of urban growth, rising prices and, initially, labour shortages. Workers' protests took place in a variety of industries, but particularly among railway workers, who differed from the majority in being housed in a company location where they could develop some sense of worker solidarity, and also among lorry drivers who took the lead in forming a trade union. Leaders of this union, notably Laurence Makata, exemplified the socially ambiguous character of workers living in a semi-rural environment. Several made the transition from wage earner to independent businessman while at the same time expanding their links with the urban poor through the construction of ties of patronage.

These different responses influenced worker-nationalist relations from the late-1950s. This was a period in which rising unemployment interacted with increased political expectations to stimulate a new wave of worker agitation. Makata, like other businessmen anxious to break the expatriate stranglehold over the transportation of cash crops, played an important role in mobilising urban support for Congress. Labour leaders, however, tended to keep their distance from the nationalists although sharing many of their political aspirations. Finally, rank-and-file railway workers demonstrated an awareness of their collective interests by conducting a successful strike in 1960 in which neither the official trade union nor the party was involved.

[123] An alternative analysis is contained in Woods, 'Rail workers in Malawi', 737–8. This, however, is based on the questionable assumption, for which no evidence has yet been presented, that a single tradition of worker militancy can be traced from the 1960 strike through to the protests of railway workers in the early 1970s and on to the wave of strikes that swept through Blantyre from May 1992.