

## ARISE YE STARVELINGS

### The Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and its Aftermath

*Arise! ye starvelings from your slumbers ;  
Arise! ye criminals of want,  
For Reason in revolt now thunders,  
And at last ends the Age of Cant*

*(The International)*

# INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL STUDIES

SERIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF SOCIETIES

VOLUME III



INTERNATIONAAL INSTITUUT  
VOOR SOCIALE STUDIËN - 'S GRAVENHAGE

# ARISE YE STARVELINGS

The Jamaican Labour Rebellion  
of 1938 and its Aftermath

by

KEN POST



1978

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THE HAGUE / BOSTON / LONDON

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4613-4103-1

e-ISBN-13: 978-1-4613-4101-7

DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4613-4101-7

For Edgar Daley and the dead of 1938

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Sarah Thomas

Stanley Thomas

and an unknown woman.

## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

However it is received by critics and others, this book is important to me, because it represents the major intellectual expression of a process of re-education which began in earnest with my stay in Jamaica in 1967-69. In that respect I owe thanks to what was then the Overseas Development Ministry of the United Kingdom which – ironically as it turned out – supplied the University of Manchester with the funds to finance my loan to the University of the West Indies as a sort of ‘technical assistance’. Conversely, I do not owe thanks to the government of Jamaica which in March 1971 deported me in less than twenty-four hours when I returned to complete my research. On the other hand, again ironically considering my reservations about it, I must thank the government which succeeded it for giving me six weeks grace to revisit the island in October-November 1972. The Institute of Social Studies, which now employs me, was generous enough to ignore the loss of its investment in my first return trip and to make another in the second.

It will soon be apparent to the reader that this work is intended to be an analysis in the Marxist theoretical tradition. Little reference will be found to the undoubtedly relevant but ultimately to be rejected speculations of bourgeois scholars, despite the direct challenge of one of the most sympathetic of them, John Rex, that ‘I would ask in all seriousness whether it helps our understanding of what is going on in Jamaica, South Africa, Bradford or Southall to use terms like “social formation”, “conjuncture”, “practice” and “contradiction”’.<sup>1</sup> Those who find the Marxist tradition unsympathetic, therefore, will probably not have their views changed, since only reality can do that, not theory. For those who find any sort of theorising uncomfortable, I have crammed in here a plenitude – some will say a surfeit – of data. This is perhaps because I was (mis)educated in the British empiricist tradition, though I like to think it is because I feel that Marxists must meet empiricists on the latter’s ground and prove that data can only be well-used if you have a correct theory. Fortunately there is good licence for this in the comment of Friedrich Engels that ‘only a mass of critically-sifted, completely mastered historical material can enable one to accomplish such a task.’<sup>2</sup> What I have attempted to

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1. John Rex: *Race, Colonialism and the City* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 177.

2. Friedrich Engels: ‘Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works in Two Volumes* (Moscow: Foreign Publishing House, 1951), Vol. I, 335.

do, therefore, is to take an episode of British colonial history which is, more importantly, an essential conjunction in the development of modern Jamaica, the events which I have termed the Jamaican labour rebellion of 1938, and to master the available historical material as far as I could by sifting it critically through a frame of Marxist theory.

In working on my own more theoretical chapters I have benefitted from the comradely criticisms (in the rough order in which they were made over the years 1970-76) of Gavin Williams, Archie Mafeje, Richard Kleinegriss, Colin Leys, Jitendra Mohan, Anthony Arblaster, Juan Pablo Pérez Sáinz, the members of my ISS seminar on 'Peasants, Workers and Development', Bertell Ollman, Aidan Foster-Carter and, above all, Peter Waterman, who by frequently confessing his lack of understanding all too often showed me the lack of clarity of my own exposition. Thanks for specific help on various points will also be found scattered through the footnotes, but one name, that of Robert A. Hill, should be brought forward for his special solicitude in bringing data to my notice.

The collection of material was much helped by the staffs of the Library of the University of the West Indies (Mona campus), the Library of the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the same place, the West India Reference Library in Kingston, Jamaica, the Island Record Office in Spanish Town, the New York Public Library, the Public Record Office in London, the library of Rhodes House, Oxford, and the British Museum newspaper collection at Colindale. Parts of Chapter VI first appeared in my essay, 'The Bible as Ideology: Ethiopianism in Jamaica, 1930-38', published in *African Perspectives*, edited by C.H. Allen and R.W. Johnson (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), and I am grateful for permission to reproduce them. Very special thanks are due to Richard Hart, who put not only his collection of documents but his time and memory at my disposal; I await with trepidation his verdict on what I have done with them. Nevertheless, he is only one of the many Jamaicans and other West Indians – too many to mention individually – who helped me towards what little understanding I have of their history.

Lastly, my thanks to Koos van Wieringen for drawing the map, to Jean Sanders, an indefatigable editor, to Jorge Lafitte, who did the Index, and to Els Mulder and all the other heroines of secretarial labour, some of them even unknown to me because of the depersonalisation of work under capitalism, who have made a readable text out of the cobbled-together horror that I gave them.

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## A NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout this book certain abbreviations are used in the footnotes for the sake of brevity. Thus, in citing newspapers, *The Daily Gleaner* becomes *D.G.*, *The Jamaica Standard* *J.S.*, *Plain Talk* *P.T.*, *Public Opinion* *P.O.* and *The Jamaica Labour Weekly* *J.L.W.* Newspapers less frequently referred to are named in full. Similarly, the collections of papers in the Rhodes House Library, the Creech Jones Papers (MSS. Brit. Emp. s.332), Papers of Charles Wilton Wood Greenidge (MSS. Brit. Emp. s.285) and Fabian Colonial Bureau Papers (MSS. Brit. Emp. s.365) are referred to as *C.J.P.*, *G.P.* and *F.C.B.P.* The papers of Richard Hart become *H.P.* In the Public Record Office are the Admiralty papers (Adm.), Foreign Office papers (F.O.) and Cabinet papers (Cab.), of which some use has been made, but especially the papers from the Colonial Office (C.O.). The relevant series from the last are C.O. 137 (Jamaica), C.O. 318 (general West Indies) and C.O. 950 (the papers of the West Indian Royal Commission of 1938-39). Up to 1923 C.O. 137 papers are bound into volumes; after this date they are still in the original files in boxes. References are therefore either item descriptions and volume numbers or item descriptions and numbers for box and file; in the latter case, the title of the file as well as its number is given when first cited, only the number subsequently. For the Rhodes House collections item descriptions with box and file numbers are given. Folio numbers are not given for the C.O. files, where the foliation is somewhat erratic, but are for the Rhodes House collections. Because of their frequent occurrence, 'Governor' (of Jamaica, unless otherwise stated) has been abbreviated to 'G.' and 'Secretary of State' (for the Colonies) to 'S. of S.'

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# Jamaica, 1938

