

Facts Behind the Gold Coast Riots

By George Padmore

THE statement of the Under-Secretary of State for Colonies on the recent riots on the Gold Coast is a shameful attempt to dodge official responsibility. To ignore the economic background giving rise to unrest and to assert, as did Mr. Rees-Williams, that the Africans were mere dupes of unscrupulous Communists, exploiting them in the interests of Moscow, is wicked, to say the least.

Such irresponsible allegations by an official spokesman of the Colonial Office can only serve to prejudice whatever enquiry the governor might institute. It brings discredit on the Labor Government which Africans already suspect of protecting the interests of big business against them, especially that of the United Africa Company. Surely it would have been wiser, and fairer, if Mr. Rees-Williams had conceded Mr. Gallacher's request for the appointment of a commission of "responsible trade union officials" from Great Britain to investigate the causes of the riots and to suspend judgment until such time as the report has been submitted to the colonial secretary. After all, there was nothing so outrageous in Mr. Gallacher's suggestion. Even *The Times* took Mr. Rees-Williams to task in its editorial on "The Gold Coast Riots" in its issue of March 5. "There is no need to prejudge the question," *The Times* asserted. "A full inquiry has been promised and will no doubt establish the facts. Investigation of the underlying causes of the troubles is also needed." Why, then, brand the Africans as Communist stooges simply because it suited a Communist M.P. to interrogate the under-secretary of state?

The instituting of independent enquiries is a well established procedure in British colonial administration. Whenever riots and labor disturbances occur in colonial dependencies, commissions are invariably sent out to probe into the causes giving rise to the unrest. It is only a few months ago that the colonial secretary issued the report of such an enquiry carried out in Trinidad by a "responsible trade

The British offer bullets instead of bread. Facts behind the Gold Coast riots of February 28

unionist," Mr. W. Dally. The Colonial Office library is full of reports by royal or other commissions. Mr. Gallacher's suggestion, therefore, was quite a normal one, and by his rejection of it the under-colonial secretary forces the suspicion that he has very good reasons for trying to cover up what Mr. Gallacher described as "a shameful business"—the shooting of 21 unarmed Africans and the wounding of over 200 by Gold Coast Police and troops.

Economic Background

Despite the introduction of a new constitution, in the summer of 1946, under which the Africans have been granted a majority membership on the Legislative Council—composed mostly of chiefs or their nominees—there has been widespread discontent of an economic nature among all strata of the population—workers, farmers, peasants, even the civil servants, including the police. The discontent has resulted from the inflationary economy which has gripped the country since the end of the war.

The Africans are large consumers of imported commodities, which have become scarcer and scarcer and inevitably dearer and dearer. This scarcity, the Africans alleged, was aggravated by a government policy favoring certain big merchants in the importation of textiles, and other goods. A special commission of enquiry, presided over by Mr. Martindale, was set up to enquire into the allegations, and it brought to light shocking disclosures. As a result of the commission's findings, British officials in the customs and currency control departments were dismissed from the service.

Because of the complaints about the terribly high cost of living and the demands from the pensionable African civil servants, a commission was ap-

pointed under the chairmanship of Sir Walter Harrigan, chief justice of the Gold Coast. This commission found that the cost of living had gone up by 200 per cent and recommended an increase in salaries and cost of living bonus to the extent of 35 per cent. Following this award, the non-pensionable African employees, such as public works employees and other weekly wage-earners, made similar demands. Another commission was then established, under the chairmanship of Dr. K. A. Korsah, an African puisne judge. This commission recommended minimum wage increases of from one penny to sixpence per day. It also recommended a minimum wage of 1/6d. [32¢] to 2/- [40¢] per day for weekly employees in the Northern territory of the Gold Coast and 2/9 [58¢] to 3/- [60¢] per day in the coastal towns, where the cost of living is much higher than in the rural areas.

At this stage, the teachers in the religious schools, who had been excluded from the awards under the Harrigan Commission, raised their claims for salary increase. These claims were investigated by a commission under the chairmanship of The Hon. T.R.O. Hangin, the chief commissioner for the colony. Recognizing the justice of these claims, Mr. Hangin recommended that the salaries of teachers in non-government schools should be brought into line with those of their colleagues in government schools.

The farmers and peasants, realizing that they constitute the backbone of the country's economy, inasmuch as cocoa accounts for 95 per cent of the Gold Coast's export trade, demanded an increase in prices. In order to avoid a threatened hold-up of cocoa crops, which would affect Great Britain's dollar intake at a time when cocoa is fetching £177 [\$713.31] per ton in New York, the government offered to increase the price by 45 per cent over the previous year.

This series of appeasements only incited other sectors of the population, whose interests had until then been ignored. The workers on the govern-

ment railways and in the privately exploited mines put forward their claims now for wage increases. When these were resisted the men declared strikes. The stoppage of transport increased the inflationary tendency and, after several weeks, the government agreed to meet the workers' demands. The mining companies, represented by Mr. Duncan Sandys, Mr. Churchill's son-in-law, were also forced to give way, following arbitration proceedings conducted by Mr. William Gorman, a British K.C.

African clerks and other employees of the Bank of British West Africa and Barclays Bank threatened to strike, and salary and wage increases were conceded to them.

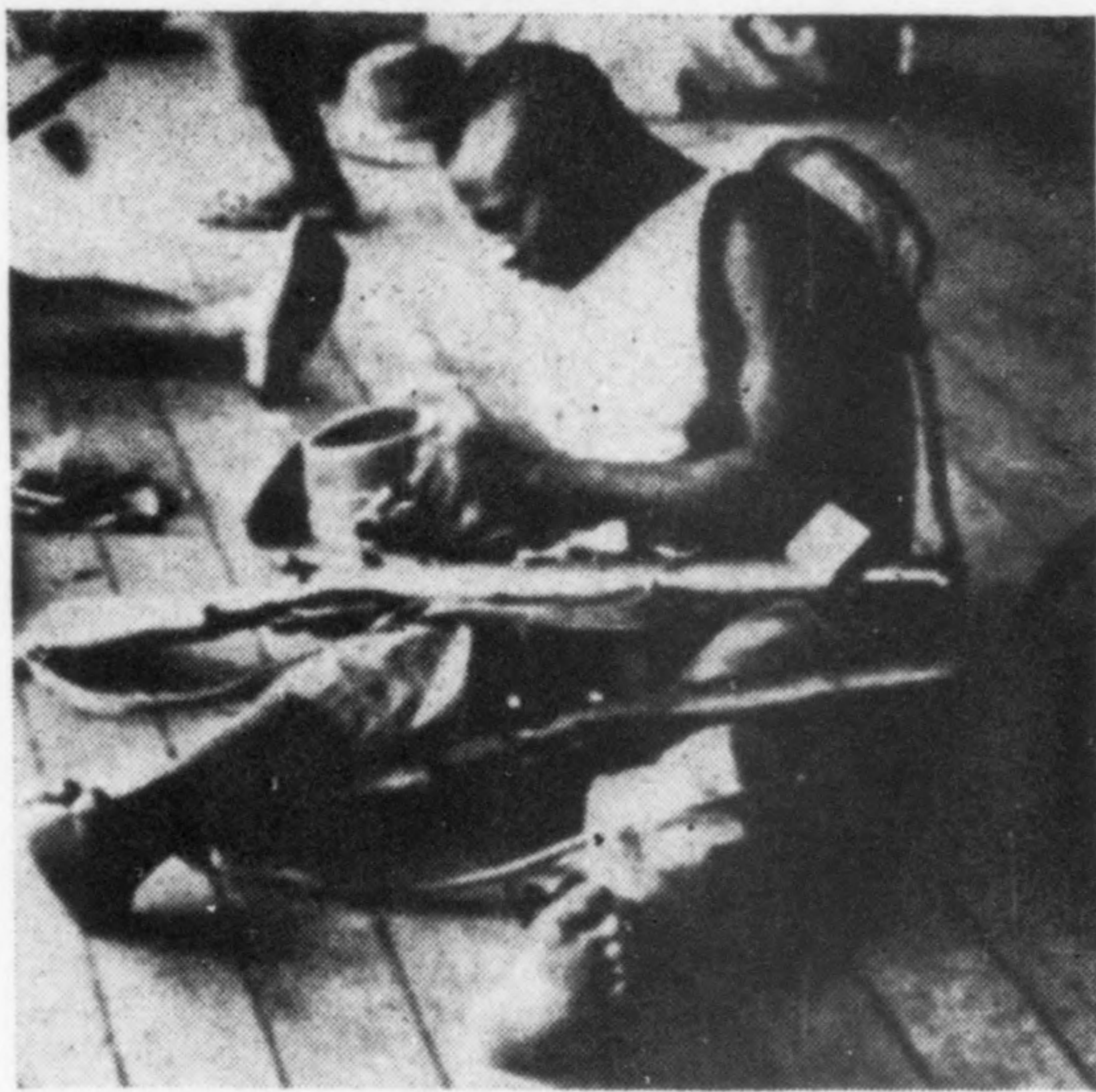
Boycott Organized

However, parallel with this increased circulation of money, prices of essential commodities sky-rocketed, because the local government administration would not take appropriate measures to arrest the vicious spiral of inflation. Unable to get the British administration to clean up the black market and establish price controls and rationing of essential foods and cotton piece goods imported into the country by the United Africa Company and other monopolistic firms, the people decided to take the situation into their own hands.

On the initiative of a progressive chief, Nii-Kwabena-Boone III, head of the Osu Abata division of the Ga State Council, an anti-inflation campaign committee was established. The committee appealed to the people throughout the country to boycott all British goods until such time as the United Africa Company and other members of the Association of West African Merchants reduced their prices. The boycott was launched on January 26, 1948, and was supported by 63 Paramount Chiefs, and other influential political leaders associated with the United Gold Coast Convention, a newly organised nationalist movement.

As soon as the threat of boycott was implemented into action, the government rushed to set up a Price Control Committee under Mr. H. S. Hector, accountant-general of the colony. Among the members nominated by the governor were Mr. P. H. Fitzgerald, general manager of the United Africa Company; and Mr. F. H. Boret, district agent of the Commonwealth Trust Ltd., two of the leading firms of the Association of West African Merchants, against whose actions the people have so bitterly complained.

With all sections of the population having secured some increase in in-



British Combine
AN AFRICAN soldier cleaning his rifle.

come to meet the heavily rising cost of living, the demobilised soldiers, who had served with the Fourteenth Army in the Burma campaign, decided to make representations to the government for help for themselves. Their organisation, the Ex-Servicemen's Union, secured permission from the commissioner of police to hold a demonstration. It is alleged by the authorities that this procession departed from the agreed route and attempted to march towards Christiansborg Castle, the Governor's official residence. Fighting ensued when the police interfered.

The result of this skirmish between the police and the ex-soldiers was a riot. Tear gas was turned upon the people and military reinforcements were brought into Accra to help the civil authorities quell the disturbance. The populace joined with the ex-servicemen and together they vented their feelings upon the property of United Africa Company by burning down the company stores. The rioting spread in the following days to other parts of the Gold Coast. At Nsawm, 22 miles north of Accra, the capital, African ex-servicemen attacked and looted the stores of United Africa Company. Similar incidents occurred at Kumasi, the capital of Ashanti.

African Troops Unreliable

According to unofficial information reaching London, it is reported that when the local troops indicated unwillingness to suppress their own people, a battalion of the Nigerian Regiment of the West African Frontier Force was flown from Ibadan in Nigeria to Accra. When they left Ibadan, the troops were not informed of their destination, but when they arrived on the Gold Coast and realised they were to be used to shoot down their Gold Coast comrades, they, too, showed unwillingness. It is further reported that an attempt was made to bring in a

battalion of troops from Sierra Leone, but having heard of events on the Gold Coast, these troops, it is said, refused to carry out military orders and have been disarmed and interned in barracks. Confronted with this solidarity of the West African peoples, the governor appealed to the Colonial Office to send military aid, and two companies of the 2nd Battalion Cameroonian at Gibraltar were ordered to stand-by in readiness to fly to Accra. Two frigates, the *Actaeo* and the *Nereide*, were dispatched from Simonstown in the Union of South Africa.

Meantime, however, while these forces were being mobilised from the outposts of Empire, the governor, faced with the possibility of a nation-wide uprising, appealed to the chiefs to restrain their people. In a country-wide broadcast, Otumfo Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II, King of Ashanti, went to the microphone in his capital Kumasi, and appealed to the "good hearts" of his people to exercise "that peaceful restraint which is characteristic of us," and obey law and order.

Communist Smear

In light of the foregoing facts, the allegation made by the under-secretary of state that the unrest on the Gold Coast "is almost certainly communist incitement" is completely without foundation. It is merely an attempt to discredit the popular progressive movements in Africa which are now agitating for self-government. "Give a dog a bad name and hang it" seems to be the new tactic of the Colonial Office in relation to the nationalist awakening throughout Africa. Formerly the leaders of these movements were branded as "anti-British and anti-white." Now, by labelling them communist at this time when the ideological "cold war" is gathering momentum against communists within the British trade unions and Labor Party, they are hoping to alienate from the Africans the sympathies of those sections of British people, including Labor back-benchers, who have expressed solidarity with the colonial struggle.

The United Gold Coast Convention, which has been openly accused in certain quarters of being a communist-dominated organization, is nothing of the sort. It is a legitimate nationalist movement, voicing the aspirations and demands of the Gold Coast people for political freedom and economic and social emancipation from the yoke of British Imperialism.

The spectre of Pan-Africanism is haunting the "Dark Continent." Africa is on the march.