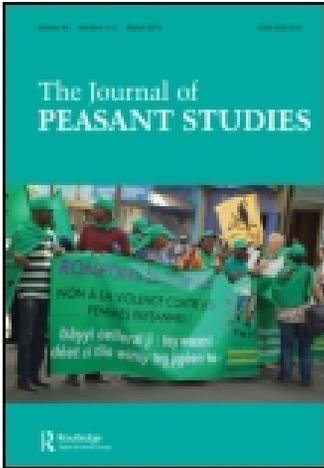


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### Labour control and labour resistance in the plantations of colonial Malaya

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# Labour Control and Labour Resistance in the Plantations of Colonial Malaya

P. RAMASAMY

## INTRODUCTION

In this essay I examine labour control and labour resistance in plantations in pre-war colonial Malaya. I argue that the nature and scope of resistance among Indian and Chinese labour was to a large extent determined by the system of control in question. Individual forms of resistance of a passive nature were dominant under the indentured system of labour control. These forms of resistance ranged from simple acts of foot-dragging to the more conspicuous act of desertion [Scott, 1985]. Under the (Indian) *kangani* and the (Chinese) contract systems of labour control, collective forms of resistance of both passive and confrontational types began to emerge [Adas, 1986]. These instances of collective resistance were forcibly put down by the colonial state acting in the interests of the plantation capitalists in the belief that these were inspired by agitators and communists.

## COLONIAL PLANTATION IN MALAYA: ITS HISTORY, STRUCTURE AND OWNERSHIP

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the British succeeded in extending political control over the Malay peninsula both by crushing peasant rebellions and by placating the Malay rulers. Having done this, Britain turned next to the question of development; given that Malaya was richly endowed with forest, a plantation agricultural strategy was pursued. The pro-plantation policy was also predicated on the need to reduce Malaya's over-dependence on tin and most importantly to recoup the losses of European capitalists' failures in mining [Lim Teck Ghee, 1977: 15; Chai Hon Chan, 1964].

Even before the establishment of political control, Europeans were involved in the planting of sugar in places like Singapore, Penang, Province Wellesley and Perak, using Chinese and Indian indentured

labourers in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, the industry declined due to the difficulty of procuring an adequate labour supply, increasing competition from beet sugar production in Europe and from large scale production of sugar in Cuba and Java. The decline of the industry was also precipitated by the official policy in the 1890s that sought to reserve more areas for rice planting; areas once reserved for sugar growing were turned over for rice cultivation [Jackson, 1968: 170].

As the sugar industry declined, many European planters experimented with coffee as a plantation crop. Initially, coffee growing was impeded by planters' ignorance of local conditions, the unsatisfactory land terms offered by the British administration, and again inadequate labour supply. However, by 1890, coffee growing picked up due to the availability of cheap land, the government's attempt to provide cheap labour from India, and the replacement of Arabian coffee by the Liberian variety that was better suited to local conditions [Jackson, 1968: 183]. For about ten years, coffee enjoyed a pre-eminent position in Malayan plantation agriculture before it was replaced by rubber. Coffee production declined, among other reasons, due to dropping prices as a result of increased production in Brazil, the inability of the Liberian coffee variety to compete with other good varieties grown elsewhere, the devastations wrought by pests, and the planters' lack of initiative in improving the processing and marketing aspects of the industry [Jackson, 1968: 200].

During its pioneer stage, rubber was interplanted with crops like coffee and coconut. The commercial value of rubber or Hevea was only realised following a series of experiments at both the local level and international level. In Singapore, Henry Ridley, the Director of Singapore Botanical Gardens, through a number of experiments showed that rubber could be cultivated on a commercial scale. At the international level, the invention of the pneumatic tyre using rubber by Dunlop in 1888 was the important discovery that propelled the growth of the natural rubber industry. In 1990, rubber exported to the United States and Europe came mostly from Brazil [Drabble, 1973; Voon, 1976]. Until 1913, rubber exports from Malaya were below those of South America, but in 1914 Malaya exceeded South American exports by nearly 6,000 tons [Drabble, 1973: 109]. In 1918, exports of rubber from Malaya amounted to about 50 per cent of the world's total rubber consumption [Drabble, 1973: 130].

The big demand for rubber pushed the expansion of the plantation industry. In 1877 rubber planting amounted to only about 350 acres but went up to about 20,000 acres by 1904 [Jackson, 1968: 226], about 43,000 acres by 1910 [Drabble, 1973: 76-133], and by 1940 reached over two

million acres [Radkrishnan, 1975: 32]. The rubber industry that took shape in Malaya was composed of predominantly European owned large estates, non-European, mainly Chinese owned, medium and small estates, and smallholdings held by the peasantry. In 1921, one-fifth of total estate acreage in Malaya was in Chinese owned estates with an average size of about 400 to 500 acres [Jackson, 1968: 266]. Capital in these estates was mainly derived from family business ventures in tin mining and other commercial pursuits. In 1940, smallholdings constituted about 39 per cent (1,350,000 acres) of the total rubber acreage of 3,500,000 [Radkrishnan, 1975: 32].

Two other factors were important in contributing to the growth of the rubber industry. One was the role of the colonial state which not only provided an appropriate political climate for the development of the industry [Lim Teck Ghee, 1977], but also facilitated the flow of capital by giving special land concessions for plantation development [Jackson, 1968: 235; Lim Teck Ghee, 1976: 84–9], establishing a loan fund [Drabble, 1973: 39], and laying good lines of communications [Jackson, 1968: 236]. During the slump periods, it protected the rubber industry by introducing restriction schemes (the Stevenson Restriction Scheme in 1922 and the International Rubber Regulation Agreement in 1934; see Murray in this volume). These schemes restricted rubber output so as to raise prices and maintain the competitiveness of rubber in the world market. As argued by Bauer [1948] and Lim Teck Ghee [1977], restrictions on rubber production were mainly felt by smallholders who vented their frustrations by engaging in strikes and demonstrations.

The second factor was the change in capital ownership from proprietary to corporate ownership in the early twentieth century, which meant, among other things, monopolistic control of the rubber industry by a select group of people in Britain through a system of interlocking directorships with certain key personnel in the agency houses. According to Puthucheary [1974: 27–8], in 1953, about 75 per cent of the European estate acreage was dominated by agency houses, with only about 25 per cent not owned by public limited companies. It was also estimated that some 20 agency firms controlled the rubber industry, of which the largest were Harrisons & Crossfield, Boustead-Buttery, Guthries, R.E.A-Cumberbatch and Sime Darby. As further pointed out by Voon [1976] 77 directors (seven per cent of the total) controlled 30 per cent of total directorships, each holding five to 22 directorships.

#### FORMATION OF THE PLANTATION PROLETARIAT

The successful development of rubber plantations in late nineteenth-century Malaya relied on the availability of cheap labour. Having ex-

perienced difficulty in recruiting local native Malay labour whom the British dismissed as 'lazy' and 'unsuitable', attempts were made to bring in overseas labour. While it was true that Malays generally were not interested in plantation work, this did not mean that they had an aversion to wage labour. They objected to plantation work because of its oppressive nature – monotonous work, low wages, high mortality rate, regimented life, and other features. De Silva [1982] in his study of the political economy of Sri Lanka also concludes that Sinhalese peasants did not join the plantation workforce because of the nature of the plantation system, rather than any like or dislike for wage labour.

Initial attempts to recruit Javanese labour failed because of restrictions imposed by the Dutch authorities [Jackson, 1961: 131]. Subsequently, a Labour Commission, set up in 1910, recommended that efforts should be made to recruit Chinese labour. However, the presence in Malaya of large numbers of Chinese workers previously recruited by private agents, and their purported involvement in secret societies in places like Singapore and Penang, displeased London, even though the colonial authorities in Malaya were in favour of extending official recruitment to the Chinese. London's veto prevailed despite the protests of the Planters Association of Malaya [Ramasamy, 1990: 64].

Although official recruitment was never extended to the Chinese, there were many Chinese immigrants in Malaya by the turn of the century. Due to the heavy demand for labour, Chinese contractors working in league with brokers in places like Singapore and Penang recruited migrant labourers for Malaya. The costs of bringing labourers to Malaya were then recovered from those employers who 'purchased' them, and labourers were contractually tied to their employers until such debts were discharged. According to Blythe, in 1911 25 per cent of the estate population was Chinese, and in 1931, this increased to 35 per cent in the Federated Malay States or FMS [Blythe, 1947: 68].

In European planting circles, South Indian labour was considered ideal for plantation work. South Indian labour had all the 'right qualities' such as docility, submissiveness, malleability and little self-reliance [Sandhu, 1969: 57]. As early as 1887 Sir Frederick Weld, a senior colonial official, recommended migration from India 'because Indians are a peaceable and easily governed race'. 'It is advisable' said Weld, 'that, in a country like this, the preponderance of any one Eastern nationality should not be excessive' [Stenson, 1980: 16]. European planters' experience with South Indian labour in Ceylon also led to this preference. Furthermore, economic considerations notwithstanding, the British policy of 'divide and rule' encouraged the importation of Indians to counterbalance the growing Chinese population.

South Indian labourers were brought to Malaya first under indenture and later under the *kangani* system. The abolition of the former was not based as much on humanitarian grounds as on economic ones. The costs and problems of ensuring an adequate supply of labour made it necessary for the colonial state to recognise the requirements of plantation capital. The answer was the introduction of the *kangani* system which evolved slowly from the late 1860s. The vast majority of Indian plantation workers were brought in under this system. According to Sandhu, between 1898 and 1938, about 1,153,770 *kangani* recruits landed in Malaya at an average of 28,000 per year [Sandhu, 1969: 96]. The *kangani* system in turn was abolished in 1938 due to a dispute between the Malayan government and the Government of India over wages.

As stated by Breman [1989: 131] plantation enterprise depended on the bondage of labourers. Subservience, servility and malleability were characteristics that European planters looked for in their labour force. To these Europeans, this was not too much to expect because they had invested considerable capital in developing plantations and securing labour. Labourers were bonded as soon as they were recruited and shipped to Malaya. Under indenture, various tactics were used by agents and brokers to snare unsuspecting migrants [e.g. Tinker, 1974; Parmer, 1960].

#### CHINESE WORKERS: CONTROL AND RESISTANCE

Chinese workers unable to pay their passage became indebted to brokers or organisations involved in their transportation to Malaya. Many unsuspecting Chinese were kidnapped and shipped to Malaya by brokers bent on making a quick profit. Once in Malaya the immigrants were placed in lodging houses until they were purchased by employers. Those purchased in this manner were taken to their work places and required to toil until they had discharged their debts. Labourers recruited under this system were known as 'Chu Tsai' or 'piglets' and the persons involved in the transportation of immigrants were known as 'Chue Tsai Thau' or 'heads of piglets' [Blythe, 1947: 69].

Hugh Tinker aptly characterises indenture as a new form of slavery [1974]. Under this system of labour control that lasted until the first decade of the twentieth century, there were few differences in the way Chinese and Indian workers were treated. Unlike Indian labourers who were employed directly by planters, Chinese labourers were employed through a headman (*kepala*). Employment contracts were signed bet-

ween employers and Chinese labourers and lodged in the Chinese Protectorate Offices. Wages were not paid directly to labourers by European employers but to Chinese headmen who then paid their workers after deducting expenses and debts incurred by workers [Blythe, 1947: 80], giving headmen an interest in retaining labourers for as long as possible to make the maximum profit. Labourers were often retained even after the period of indenture had expired by debts they had acquired. The Labour Commission of 1910 reported that:

It appears also that they are frequently detained long after the year has expired for which they contracted, and after they have done more than 360 days' fair work. This is done by keeping them in debt by advances of cash or provisions, so that the cooly at the end of his year owes more than he did at the beginning [*FMS, Labour Commission*, 1910: 147].

Apart from contractual obligations imposed on Chinese indentured labourers, other mechanisms served to control them. The operation of secret societies based on clan and kinship ties was one important source of control. The Chinese headmen's important leadership role in secret societies, by virtue of their economic power, served as an effective instrument of labour control. While British officials might not have condoned all the practices of the secret societies, they none the less shared the opinion of European planters that these organisations were effective in tying labourers to the plantation. This perhaps tell us why there was little official effort to crack down on the activities of the secret societies until the 1920s. Secret societies served the dual purpose of protecting the Chinese employers and effectively disciplining labour [*Jackson*, 1961: Ch.IV].

Opium-smoking, despite its harmful effect on the health of labourers, was another notorious practice encouraged by Chinese headmen and condoned by European officials to effect control. In the early 1920s, the British Malaya Opium Committee was quite concerned over widespread opium-smoking among Chinese labourers, but did not categorically oppose opium-smoking because not all its members, particularly those representing propertied interests, were convinced that opium-smoking was harmful. After having spoken to a number of Chinese headmen, the Committee even decided that opium-smoking was beneficial to labourers: 'The extraordinary number of healed lungs which are found in opium smokers lends colour to the belief that there may also be some curative agent in the smoke' [*FMS, British Malaya Opium Committee*, 1924: 224].

There is no evidence to suggest that the British Malaya Opium Committee did anything concrete to eradicate opium smoking. Opium-smoking, as argued by Jackson, served the capitalists in the plantations in two ways. First, extreme opium addiction inevitably forced labourers to become indebted to their employers. Such indebtedness, as noted, allowed employers to re-indenture labourers for a longer period. Second, opium-smoking, again in the opinion of Chinese headmen, made it possible for labourers to work long hours [Jackson, 1961: Ch. IV]. A Chinese headman told the British Malaya Opium Committee that 'when we have an extra dose of wet weather or anything like that, opium smokers will see their work through and get it finished ...'. Similarly another Chinese headman remarked to the Committee that labourers who smoked opium were better workers than those who did not [FMS *British Malaya Opium Committee*, 1924: 225]. In short it was not surprising that plantations employers encouraged this habit [Jackson, 1961: 154].

Another form of labour control among the Chinese was the operation of *kongsis* houses or barracks where labourers were lodged by the headmen. According to the testimony of a Chinese contractor in 1910: 'The coolies are locked up after 6 p.m. They are let out to work at 6 a.m. The working hours are from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. - 9 hours a day' [Jackson, 1961: 154]. The *kongsis* were fenced and guarded to prevent the workers from escaping. According to the Assistant Protector of Chinese, Negeri Sembilan, a worker tried to escape from the *kongsis* 'because by doing so he can earn 60 cents a day on the next estate as a *laukeh* (free labourer), instead of 5 cents and food as a *sinkeh* (unfree labourer)' [Jackson, 1961: 154].

Colonial records like those cited above tend to argue higher wages as a reason for Chinese labourers to escape, but that the inhuman treatment of labourers was as much an incentive to flee cannot be discounted. In 1910, the acting Protector of Chinese, Perak, revealed to a Labour Commission how *sinkehs* were beaten and forced to eat human excrement by a headman for being too ill to take a bath. On another visit to an estate in Krian district he found that the labourers were terrorised by the headmen, who was subsequently charged and prosecuted for ill-treatment of workers [FMS, *Labour Commission*, 1910: 151].

One drawback of the Labour Commission of 1910 is that it was biased towards European-owned estates and singled out Chinese-owned estates for ill-treating labourers: 'There appears to be no ill-treatment of Chinese indentured labour on European-managed estates ... There are, however, some matters which require attention' [FMS, *Labour Commission*, 1910: 153]. Although the Commission targeted the Chinese-owned es-

tates for criticism, the persons prosecuted for labour offences were not Chinese managers but Chinese headmen [*FMS, Labour Commission*, 1910: 156-7].

The indenture system of labour control and retention was abolished for Chinese in 1914, which meant that employers could no longer use written contracts to retain their employees. The contract system, which first evolved in the tin mines, was extended to the plantations to replace indenture as the means of labour recruitment. Plantation employers now commissioned agents or private recruiters to recruit labour from China or from lodging houses in the Straits Settlement territories. This system allowed the recruitment of families, and those contracted were under a moral obligation to repay their employers for advances (written contracts being no longer allowed). The contract system was a slight improvement over indenture, but '... if the labourers were not sufficiently docile there was close surveillance by Chinese Kepalas and Sikh watchmen and the locking of the Kongsis doors at night' [*Blythe*, 1947: 99].

The contract system, which became an important feature of the plantations from the 1920s onwards, contained numerous restraints on the labour force. According to a report submitted by David Gray of the Chinese Protectorate Office, Negeri Sembilan, in 1937, the contract system worked to the disadvantage of labourers in the following ways: (a) the contractor delayed payment to the workers on the pretext that the estate manager had not paid him; (b) in the allocation of tasks to workers, the contractor tended to increase the tasks for workers (without the approval of the manager); (c) the contractor underpaid workers (for example, the manager would pay the contractor five cents per pound for rubber brought in by tappers, but the contractor would only pay four cents); (d) the contractor got the workers indebted by forcing them to buy goods from him. [*NSSF 1349/1937, Report of Inspection of Estates, Mines and Factories Employing Chinese Labour (or Gray's Report)*, 1937, Enclosure (Encl) 4].

Gray's report is a useful and detailed document that detailed the contract system but again spared European estate management criticism. This was on the premise that European estate managers could not be blamed for the unrest in 1937, because the contract system functioned independently of them. However, the contract system, despite the indirect nature of its recruitment of labour, was part and parcel of the European dominated plantation system. It can be argued the contract system, with its premium on labour subservience and docility, worked to the advantage of European-controlled plantations. While Europeans occasionally blamed labour unrest on the practices of the contractors, there is no doubt that without the sanction and blessing of Europeans the

contract system would not have taken root in the plantations in the first place [*Ramasamy*, 1990: 226].

Given the near absolute nature of management control in plantations, overt violence was rare and occurred only under extreme conditions of oppression. Passive resistance in the form of foot-dragging, not reporting to work on the pretext of being sick, running away from the work place, and the like, was very common on plantations. Chinese indentured labourers' favoured form of resistance was simply to run away from the *kongsis*, both to escape the harshness and brutality of *kongsi* confinement and to become free labourers and earn better wages. Because of the frequency of desertion among Chinese indentured workers, *kongsis* had to be strictly guarded by fences and watchmen.

What accounts for the absence of collective resistance among Chinese labourers before 1937 (see below)? It can be argued that various social mechanisms and practices within the Chinese community helped to reduce overt forms of class antagonisms. The operation of Chinese guilds based on linguistic ties, the important role of secret societies based on tribal affiliation, and the prevalent practice of smoking opium, cushioned the Chinese community from intense forms of class conflict. The secret societies headed by Chinese capitalists served both to control and protect labourers. In the plantation *kongsis* the headmen were invariably the heads of secret societies which enhanced their control of labour: 'the social and economic "closed shop" which they attempted to enforce by internal discipline in fact amounted to serious oppression' [*Jackson*, 1961: 19]. The strong internal discipline exercised by the heads of secret societies subdued overt resistance, with resistance otherwise displaced in excesses of opium-smoking and gambling [*Jackson*, 1961: 52].

There is no evidence of collective forms of resistance among the Chinese for the first three decades of the twentieth century. The first recorded instance of a major collective action by Chinese plantation workers against European capital was in 1937, when hundreds of Chinese rubber tappers in a number of estates in the Ulu Langat district in the state of Selangor went on strike for better wages and living conditions. The strike later spread to other areas in Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Malacca, Johore and Pahang. By late March 1937, an estimated 30,000 Chinese labourers were on strike in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, of whom 25,000 were employed in rubber estates [*Selangor Secretariat File* (SSF) 194/1937, *Strikes on Rubber Estates in Kajang Area*, 1937, Encl. 2]. Others were factory and mine workers, organised in the Malayan General Labour Union (MGLU, a labour affiliate of the Malayan Communist Party) who struck in sympathy with the Ulu Langat plantation labourers. In some of the sympathy strikes, Indian and Javanese

workers also participated, although in small numbers [*FMS, Labour Department Report, 1937: 54*].

The speed with which the strikes spread from district to district, state to state, and estate to factory, suggests that the MCP (Malayan Communist Party) had considerable influence in directing and coordinating them. Yeo Kim Wah [1976: 50] argues that the strikes were directed by the MCP, and that the celebration of International Women's Day, the raising of the Red Flag in a number of estates, and the formation of the Rubber Workers' Union (RWU), were all organised by communists. Workers demands included reduction of workloads, (daily tapping of 250 trees instead of 400), extra compensation for cleaning tapping equipment, benefits for pregnant women, improvement in living quarters, and work-free public holidays [*SSF 194/1937, Encl. 3*].

A significant target of the labour unrest was the contract system, and in particular estate *kepalas* (contractors) and Chinese *towkays* (capitalists), who were the traditional leaders of their communities. As pointed out by Yeo Kim Wah [1976: 55] these leaders lost much of their considerable power in the community as they were virtually displaced by the communist leadership, which effectively organised workers to challenge authority in the plantations. When some Chinese associations attempted to play a conciliatory role, they were rebuffed by workers as representing the capitalists. European managers tried to use the *kepalas* to intervene and persuade labourers to return to work, but the labourers refused [*SSF 194/1937, Encl. 4*].

The strikes in the Ulu Langat district lasted for more than a month. The colonial authorities in league with estate managers saw the strikes as manifestations of communist influence and, fearful of losing their political control, crushed the labour uprising. Police raids were carried out throughout the country, and important working class leaders were detained and eventually banished. After the raids, Selangor's Chief Police Officer remarked: 'The raid had an excellent effect – and destroyed completely the morale of the labour force' [*SSF 194/1937, Encl. 6*]. Following police repression, labourers had no alternative but to negotiate with the employers as arranged by the Chinese Protectorate Office.

As is evident from the colonial documents, the strikes and militancy exhibited by Chinese plantation workers caught the authorities by surprise [*SSF 194/1937, Encl. 7, Report by the Chief Police Officer*]. It never occurred to them that workers in Malaya, known for their docility, could go so far as to pose a danger to the colonial order. The High Commissioner felt that any public inquiry would embarrass not only the government but also the employers. In fact, he directed his anger against the

officials of the Chinese Protectorate Office, who were at times at odds with the employers over their treatment of labour. The High Commissioner's view was that officials had not understood the Chinese community well; if they had, the March strikes could have been averted [*Yeo Kim Wah*, 1976: 70].

The High Commissioner directed the various government departments to monitor developments in the Chinese community. When some departments proposed introducing social legislation to prevent disturbances in the plantations, he rejected them saying 'inspection is in my opinion the prime need' [NSSF 1349/1937, Gray's Report, Encl. 4]. He advised the British Residents in the affected states to adopt a similar approach to that of the British Resident in Pahang, who directed all his district officers to give top priority to inspections [NSSF 1349/1937, Gray's Report, Encl. 4]. In fact, David Gray's report on the conditions of Chinese labour in the plantations, was undertaken in the context of the appeal for more inspection reports on labour conditions.

#### INDIAN WORKERS: CONTROL AND RESISTANCE

Indians, unlike the Chinese, were recruited and shipped to Malaya with the blessings of the colonial governments in India and Malaya. However, the much used rhetoric of 'official' in no way prevented gross violations of labourers' fundamental rights. The Indian Immigration Ordinance, passed in the late nineteenth century to 'protect' newly arrived immigrants in Malaya, served the interests of the capitalist-planters by punishing labourers who broke their contract. An Indian Immigration Agent in Penang who was supposed to enforce the provisions of the Ordinance was ineffectual in looking after the welfare of immigrants [*Jackson*, 1961: 69].

Unlike the Chinese, Indians were directly employed by European estates where labour control was much more systematic and severe. Before the 1890s, a 'joint and several' type of recruitment contract was imposed on labourers, under which each member of a gang or a group of workers was liable for the default of others. A Labour Commission of 1890 described this system as 'capable of very inhuman application, even to the making one man in a hundred work out the defaults of ninety-nine' [*FMS, Labour Commission*, 1890: 38].

In the 1890s the 'joint and several' type of contract was replaced by the Indian Immigration Ordinance, which stipulated that immigrants should only sign indentures on their arrival. Contracts established under the indenture system were weighted in favour of the employers; labourers

found that their breach of contract was severely punished while employers' offences against labour went unpunished. Colonial officials were no doubt convinced that the planters were doing a public service in bringing workers into Malaya. Lamb, an outspoken member of the Province Wellesley Planters' Club, remarked:

The Planters are the chief importers of labour into this country, and the immigration is in no way subsidised by Government as in most other Colonies importing Indian or Chinese labour. The Planter has thus not only all the risk and trouble of importation, but also that of passing the men through the critical climatising period, whilst ultimately only a portion of the imported labour remains on estates, the rest being absorbed into the general labour supply to the benefit of the public at large [*Jackson*, 1961: 65].

The Protector of Immigrants of the Straits Settlements who once remarked that Indian coolies were well treated in Malaya, later observed that coolies received very low wages in Malaya and were 'far less liberally treated' in comparison to other colonies. He asked 'Are then desertions from the estates to be wondered at?' [*Jackson*, 1961: 65].

The indenture contract facilitated control over the labour force, especially since indentured labourers found it impossible to regain their status as free labourers. European employers, despite everything working in their favour, were the most vociferous critics of the government, wanting the authorities to enact even more stringent laws to punish labourers who breached contracts. By the late 1880s, the only way for labourers to escape the harshness of the plantation system was to desert and move elsewhere. Rather than examining labour conditions, the authorities concluded that higher wages in nearby plantations were the main cause for desertions. This explanation, typical of colonial officials, absolved European employers of any fault.

The indenture system not only helped overcome the problem of labour shortages but, more importantly, helped keep a tight lid on wages. Because of miserably low wages, workers were perpetually in debt which in turn reinforced low wage levels. The Principal Medical Officer of the Straits Settlements noted '... it is more likely the new cooly has nothing at all left from his pay at the end of the month and is probably in debt, with no surplus to buy anything with (sic)'. He also noted that employers cut labourers' wages for very minor offences [*Jackson*, 1961: 64].

In enforcing their control, employers frequently resorted to violence. A commission appointed to investigate labour conditions in Malaya in 1890 pointed out that labourers were often beaten in estates. However, the commission blamed native supervisors and not European managers

or their assistants [*FMS, Labour Commission*, 1890: 51]. A subsequent commission, however, documented cases of assault by European managers against labourers [*FMS, Labour Commission*, 1910: 4]. It is clear that violence was very much part of the plantation system. As Breman [1989: 164–7] has pointed out, violence served to maintain the social distance between coolies and their bosses; moreover, violence was considered by planters as a necessary evil to ‘educate’ rebellious coolies.

The *kangani* system replaced indenture in 1910, and helped check some of the grosser abuses of labour; coercion nevertheless remained an important feature of labour control. As shown by Jain [1970: Ch.4], the *kangani* used his kinship and caste ties to bind plantation labourers to him. The *kangani*’s money lending activities constituted another important aspect of his paternal role. Money given on credit was recovered from labourers either by deduction from their wages or enrolling them in a savings scheme. Selvaratnam [1983: 27], in a study of two estates, shows that in the early twentieth century, the management paid the wages of the labourers to the *kangani* so that he could deduct a proportion of the debt owed him. Labourers always repaid their debts to the *kangani* due to their social dependence on him [Jain, 1990: 21].

There was an uglier side to the *kangani*’s role. The *kangani* was given the authority by management to mete out severe and drastic punishments, and in the first two decades of the century was, even given the authority in some cases to kill estate workers who engaged in premarital sexual intercourse. On occasion, the *kangani* inflicted such severe beatings that victims had to be hospitalised or died [Jain, 1970: 280].

Assaults against workers were common in plantations. Estate employers gave the impression to the colonial authorities that they were as interested as the latter in eliminating physical assaults on labourers. European employers blamed the *kanganis* who, they argued, got carried away in their zeal as estate foremen [*FMS, Labour Commission*, 1910: 6]. Physical punishments meted out by the *kanganis* were in accordance with the dictates of the employers. The *kangani* was not a mediator of conflicts between labour and capital; he was very much the agent of capital and his primary role was to subject labour to the rigorous discipline required by the plantation production system.

The colonial authorities became concerned about the strong hold of *kanganis* over their labour force, and warned employers to check the power of *kanganis*:

The affluence and power acquired by many of the *kanganis* is a matter which requires the careful attention of all employers of labour; *kanganis* can make themselves very useful in obtaining

labour and in every matter affecting its employment on the estates; but it is dangerous to allow them to get too much control into their hands at the expense of the personal influence of the manager of the estate. There are indications of such a state of affairs existing at present at some places; it will be a serious menace to stability of labour forces throughout the country if this tendency becomes much accentuated [*Jackson*, 1961: 118].

Indeed, there were instances where the *kangani* used his power to move workers out of estates in defiance of the management. There were also occasions when *kanganis* organised labour protests and wildcat strikes. Despite such instances of defiance against management, this was not the norm. Colonial records on *kangani* disputes with employers show that they occurred not to defend labour but in pursuit of the personal interests of *kanganis* [*Ramasamy*, 1990: 190–93].

The plantation class structure was one in which Europeans occupied managerial roles, educated Asians filled clerical and supervisory roles, while the South Indian Tamils constituted the labouring masses. This class structure was reinforced in racial and ethnic terms as managers were whites and Asian supervisory staff were mainly from Kerala and Ceylon. The estate management ensured labour acquiescence by the provision of estate shops, places of worship, toddy shops and creches, which among other things created a psychology of dependence. As noted by Jain [1970: 285], the degree of management 'generosity' fluctuated with its need for labour; in times of acute need for a stable labour force, as in the 1920s, European managers showed more interest in the welfare of labour.

As with Chinese labour under indenture, lack of evidence prevents us from providing a detailed picture of individual forms of resistance among Indian labour in the plantations. Both European officialdom and planters in Malaya had good reasons to paint a picture of worker well-being and prosperity in Malaya. However, there are bits and pieces in the colonial records which confirm that individual and collective forms of resistance were present.

One such piece of evidence is to be found in Table 1. The figures provide an indication of the extent of the 'problem' of desertion among Indian labourers. According to the report, desertions were more common among labourers who were stronger and healthier. Since planters wished to make it clear that such attempts were not worth repeating, those caught escaping were punished severely and forced to work out the period of their contract.

Workers wanted to desert their work-places because of appalling conditions. For example, according to the report of the Labour Commis-

TABLE 1  
DESERTION AND RECAPTURE UNDER THE INDENTURE SYSTEM

Year	Average Population of Indentured Labourers	Desertions	Recaptures
1902	4,008	387	91
1904	1,184	244	61
1906	3,515	444	63
1908	4,983	788	189
1910	3,041	351	43

Source: *FMS, Labour Commission 1910*, p. 56 (National Archives, Kuala Lumpur).

were 351 deaths and 6,569 admissions to government and estate hospitals. In 1908, out of an average population of 5,000 there were 423 deaths and 6,058 admissions to hospitals [*FMS, Labour Commission, 1910, 45*]. Given the pro-plantation bias of the Commission it can be argued that the figures obtained were, if anything, conservative. Many who did not have the will or energy to desert, literally worked themselves to death as reported by the Labour Commission of 1910: 'these conditions engender a state of mind which renders many indentured Indian labourers careless as to whether they live or die and lessens their power of resisting disease' [*FMS, Labour Commission, 1910, 45*].

In regard to Indian labour, there are few recorded instances of collective resistance of the avoidance-type under the indentured system. In December 1912 about 1500 Telegu labourers of the Rantau Panjang-Sungei Tinggi stopped work and marched in the direction of Klang [*SSF 5679/1912, Strike at Rantau Panjang Estate, Encl. 1*]. A few months later, a similar incident took place in the Escot estate, Tanjung Malim, Perak. On 15 April 1913, about 280 labourers, mostly Telegus, stopped work and marched in the direction of Tapah, taking with them their women and children and possessions [*SSF 214/1913, Coolies Strike at Escot Estate, Tanjung Malim, Encl. 1*]. In 1915, over 100 workers of the Sipantas estate, Sabak Bernam, left the estate [*SSF 4841/1915, Labour Trouble on an Estate at Sabak Bernam, Encl. 1*]. In the 1920s, with the *kangani* system in force, mass desertions also reflected conflicts between *kanganis* and employers, for example, on the Sogmana estate [*Ramasamy, 1990: 191*].

What were the causes of these desertions? In the case of the Rantau Panjang-Sungei Tinggi estate labourers, the employers' non-payment of wages for six months and their harsh treatment precipitated the walk-out. In the case of the Escot estate, the labourers quit because they were

unable to tolerate the high mortality rate, low wages, management's broken promises, and the frequent assaults against them. The labourers of the Sipantas estate left because they were unable to stand the unhealthy and harsh working and living conditions [SSF 5679/1912, SSF 241/1913, SSF 4841/1915].

In these three cases of labour resistance, employers felt that labourers deserted because they were instigated by certain ringleaders. The manager of Rantau Panjang–Sungei Tinggi estate convinced the Assistant Commissioner of Labour for Klang that Telegu labourers were the source of trouble – Telegus were judged 'an exceptionally bad class of labourers' [SSF 5679/1912, Encl. 3]. The Assistant Commissioner, like the manager, felt that certain ringleaders were responsible for the unrest and advised the District Officer of Kuala Selangor to take appropriate action against them. The District Officer in turn ordered the police to arrest and detain the labourers, especially those suspected of being leaders. Over a hundred workers were charged and jailed for breaching their contracts under section 229/30 of the Labour Code [SSF 5679/1912, Encl. 3]. The Deputy Controller of Labour was not pleased with this action because the alleged offences were committed before the Labour Code of 1912 came into force, and he urged the Resident Selangor to intervene to seek the release of the jailed labourers. The Resident did not. Later, just before their release, when approached by the Assistant Commissioner of Labour for Klang, they refused to return to their former estate, saying that they preferred to stay in jail or 'even walk into the sea and be drowned' [SSF 5679/1912, Encl. 2].

The manager of the Escot estate was also of the opinion that the unrest in his estate was the work of certain ringleaders. He sought the permission of the Controller of Labour to arrest and detain five men whom he suspected. However, this was denied and the Controller further warned him that if the alleged ringleaders were arrested he would not hesitate to institute legal proceedings against the manager [SSF 241/1913]. In the Sepintas estate, the manager also sought the permission of the Labour Department to arrest and detain labourers who fled but was turned down [SSF 4841/1915, Encl. 1].

As with Chinese plantation labour, it is possible to speak of collective resistance among Indian labour as more confrontational in nature in the 1930s and onwards. Factors such as the severe effects of the depression on the Indian labour force, its more domiciled nature, and restrictions on movement between estates, contributed to a situation where Indian workers developed more confrontational types of collective resistance, which invariably took the form of strikes. According to the Labour Department Annual Reports, Malaya witnessed ten strikes in 1934, three

strikes in 1936, and quite a number of strikes in 1937 and 1938 [*Reports of the Labour Department, 1934, 1936, 1937, 1938*].

While the vast majority of the strikes were non-violent in nature there were a few cases of violent protests. In 1936, work stoppage in the Nova Scotia estate, Teluk Anson, Perak, turned into a riot as a result of the behaviour of a supervisor. Later, the labourers involved were dismissed. In 1937, a major strike in the Sungei Palu estate, Cameron Highlands, Pahang, turned violent and labourers' housing was burned. In the same year, about 100 labourers were involved in an assault against the Assistant Manager of the Belmont estate, Selangor. Apparently, the assault occurred after the labourers were punished for being late for muster [*Labour Department Reports, 1936, 1937*].

The most famous confrontational resistance engaged in by Indian labourers, and one that received international attention, was the Klang district strikes in 1941. Involving thousands of labourers, they began on 8 April and lasted until 17 May 1941 affecting an area of 1,500 square miles, stretching from Klang to Sepang in the state of Selangor. In Wilson's words: '... had the workers been better organised, with effective channels of communication to concentrations of estate labourers, the strikes would have been pan-Malayan in scope' [*Wilson, 1981: 5*].

Without negating the role of Indian nationalism through the work of the Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) and its affiliate in Klang, the Klang Indian District Union (KIDU), the major impetus behind the strikes was opposition to new restrictions introduced to boost wartime production. Company representatives in London made it known that wartime conditions precluded wage increases. Labour's bargaining position became more difficult when it became known that wage fixing powers had been transferred from estate managers to company representatives in London. Further, the classification of rubber as an 'essential good' was a warning to labour not to disrupt production in the plantations. The inequity became most pronounced when companies making huge profits due to heavy demand for rubber refused to increase wages. In order to pre-empt a strike the employers offered a five cents increase (five per cent) which was rejected outright by the KIDU [*Stenson, 1980: 60*].

The ensuing strikes were crushed by the authorities using Indian troops, and resulted in five deaths and numerous injuries. A number of labourers were deported to India and a number restricted to other districts in Malaya. The state bought wholesale the planters' argument that the strikes were the work of Indian nationalist agitators. The High Commissioner, as ever sympathetic to the planters, delayed and eventually refused to order a public inquiry into the strikes as demanded by

the Government of India through London, and in a letter to the Colonial Office in London remarked that there were 'no alleged grievances worth mentioning'. As Wilson remarked, 'the advantages of a "cover-up" clearly commended themselves to His Excellency' [Wilson, 1981: 26]

## CONCLUSION

Control of and resistance by Chinese and Indian plantation labourers in colonial Malaya exhibit important similarities. Under indenture resistance seems to have been individualistic rather than collective. Labourers unable to stand the brutalities of plantation life simply deserted to try to become free labourers and earn better wages. Those caught escaping were severely punished. Collective resistance of both the avoidance and confrontational types emerged under the (Chinese) contract and (Indian) *kangani* systems of labour control. While there is no evidence of collective resistance among the Chinese before the 1930s, there is some evidence that Indians engaged in collective resistance of the avoidance type in the 1910s and 1920s, in the form of mass desertions.

The most important collective resistance of the confrontational type took place in the late 1930s among the Chinese and in the early 1940s among the Indians. In the case of the Chinese, the strikes in the Ulu Langat district were organised by the Malayan Communist Party, mobilising workers' grievances. In 1941, thousands of Indian labourers organised by the radical Indian organisation – Central Indian Association of Malaya – staged strikes in the Klang district to press for higher wages and better living conditions. In both cases, the strikes were forcibly suppressed by the colonial authorities on the grounds that they threatened the political and economic stability of Malaya.

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