

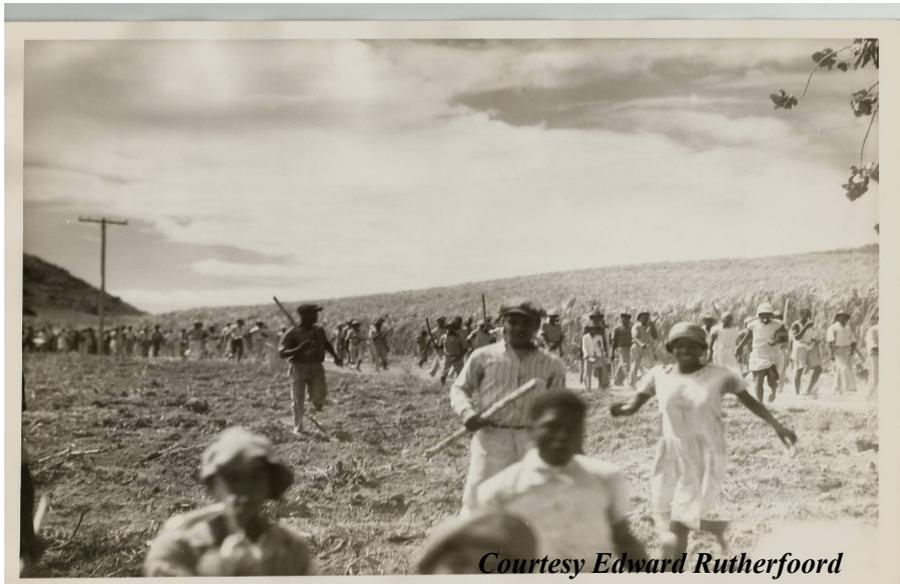
THE BUCKLEY'S RIOTS

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On 28th January 1935, the first day of the Sugar Cane crop in St. Kitts, cane cutters at Buckley's Estate on the western outskirts of Basseterre, demanded from the estate manager a return to the cane cutting rate of 1 shilling per ton, which had been the going rate until 1932. The Manager, Mr. E.D.B. Dorbridge, refused to consider the demand and ordered the cutters back to work.

Buckley's, at 918 acres was one of the larger estates on St. Kitts. Many of the day labourers lived close by at Haynes-Smith and St. Johnson villages, two newly developed working-class settlements. The owner, the Earl Hugh Buckley Matthew-Lannowe lived overseas and had little to do with the operation of the estate. The manager, Dorbridge, had become notorious for his treatment of estate workers. This combination of circumstances made Buckley's a likely flash point for working-class protest.

The cane cutters immediately held a meeting in an open field and decided to go on strike. They downed their cutlasses and marched to nearby Shadwell estate where they easily gained support from the Shadwell workers. From Shadwell this massed protest group decided to travel eastward around the island, from estate to estate, encouraging other workers to join the strike action.



Almost every estate was affected by the protest. Many of the workers actually joined the march, while others simply put away their tools and went home. By the end of the day the strikers had marched as far as Dieppe Bay, literally halfway around the island.

On the following day Mr. Dorbridge tried to start reaping by employing strikebreakers. The striking workers convinced the strikebreakers not to begin work, and they then set out westwards to cover the other side of the island. Some time later word reached them that reaping had in fact begun at Buckley's estate and the majority of them returned to Buckley's yard, many of them armed with long sticks and pieces of iron piping. Mr. Dorbridge confronted the crowd and opened fire with his shotgun, injuring four of them. This led to a riotous demonstration by the rest of the crowd, which could not be controlled by the police. The protestors gathered about the estate gate and refused to move until Dorbridge had been arrested for the shootings.



Courtesy Edward Rutherford

At about 6.00 pm the Defence Force and the Defence Force Reserve arrived. The Riot Act was read and shots were fired over the heads of the crowd, who were at this time throwing a “fierce and continuous fusillade of stones of dangerous sizes”. This not having had the desired, effect the Defence Reserve opened fire on the crowd. The crowd dispersed, but the more determined among them continued to throw stones and bottles from behind fences in the villages.

The action continued well into the night, and the targets became general rather than specific. Innocent civilians were stoned. The car of Hilton Osborne, the manager of Bourkes estate was badly damaged and his daughter Edith was cut by a stone. Some workers later said that Mr Osborne was not a target. It was just that his car was new and resembled the car of another manager whose policies they regarded as inimical to their welfare.

The unrest continued for some days, and resulted in three deaths and eight recorded serious injuries. Even after the arrival of HMS Leander and the quelling of the riot in Basseterre there were many cane fires; and groups of workers continued to patrol the country roads, visiting the estates to enforce the general strike.

It is felt that the riot in St. Kitts would not have begun at that particular time if Mr Dorbridge had been of a more sympathetic temperament. The environment in the island, and in the British West Indies as a whole in that time frame was ripe for working class rebellion. Riots of a more violent nature preceded and followed in other British colonial territories, notably Belize, Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados. Kittitian workers who went on strike were in search of specific, limited and well-defined objectives, mainly higher wages, or rather a restoration of the wages to which they had been accustomed.

What were the results of the disturbances? Certainly for the Kittitian workers they were not immediately visible. The wages were not raised during that sugar crop. However, because of the activities of men like Thomas Manchester, Victor John, Edgar Challenger, J.M. Sebastian, W.A.H. Seaton, Joseph Nathan, and the assistance of Clement Malone the lawyer for the defendants during the trials that followed, the riot marked the transition from spontaneous violent protest and rebellion to disciplined and constitutional presentation of industrial grievances through the medium of recognized and legal institutions.

It marked the emergence of recognition of a representative body for the working-class, mainly from among the leadership of the Universal Benevolent Association. It set the stage for the coming of the St. Kitts Workers’ League, for middle class coloured and working-class people. The Workers League was, of course, the forerunner of the St. Kitts Nevis Trades and Labour Union.