

## **A Historiography of the Dakar-Niger Railway Strike, 1947-1948:**

### **The Relationship Between Labor and Decolonization in French West Africa**

By Charles L Vincent III

The Dakar-Niger Railway Strike of 1947-1948 has become a notable reference point when tracing the history of decolonization within colonial French West Africa in the period following the end of World War II. Historians have determined that the strike represents a powerful integration of a growing labor class into the political sphere that had largely remained in control of colonial powers prior to the 1940s. This growing labor class evolved during the 1947-1948 strike, both in scale and importance, as the desire for individual autonomy from colonial forces empowered the developing labor class to serve as a catalyst for change along the Dakar-Niger Railway. African Historian Frederick Cooper in his analysis of the strike notes this saying:

“It involved 20,000 workers and their families, shut down most rail traffic throughout all of French West Africa, and lasted, in most regions, for five and a half months. [...] its transformation into a truly popular movement dynamized by women, climaxing in a women’s march on Dakar led by someone from the margins of society and leading to a coming together of African community against the forces of colonialism.”<sup>1</sup>

As explained by Cooper, this strike differentiated itself from the labor movements that emerged over the 1920s through the early 1940s from the way it incorporated a growing sense of community within the railway men. Over the course of this

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<sup>1</sup> Cooper, Frederick. “‘Our Strike’: Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947-48 Railway Strike in French West Africa.” *The Journal of African History* 37, no. 1 (1996): 81–118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/183289>, 81-118.

historiography, I will show the perspectives developed by historians over the late 1900s into the 2000s that demonstrate how the Dakar-Niger Railway Strike of 1947-1948 marked a turning point in history of West Africa through its impact on the decolonization movement and the development of a new political landscape.

Integral to understanding why the Dakar-Niger Railway Strike of 1947-1948 was able to impact change within colonial French West Africa, we first need to recognize the role played by the French in developing a colonial economy. The Dakar-Niger Railway was an integral part of the French plan for economic expansion within the African continent as it directly connected coastal West Africa at Dakar, Senegal to the interior of the Sub-Saharan region at the Niger River basins that long struggled economically to develop without access to the trade conducted in the coastal West African port cities.<sup>2</sup> Historian James A. Jones, working on a dissertation at University of Delaware, conducted a comprehensive analysis of the impact the Dakar-Niger Railway on West Africa demonstrating the importance French economic interest played on the region. Jones emphasizes how the Dakar-Niger Railway showcased the developing labor class and the role it held in spreading political dissent through labor strikes along the rail. He explains, "African railway workers occupied a crucial position between the colonial administration and the rest of the African population, from which they played a dominant role in shaping other African perceptions of the railway"<sup>3</sup> establishing the

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<sup>2</sup> Jones, James A. 1995. "The Impact of the Dakar-Niger Railway on the Middle Niger Valley." Order No. 9540520, University of Delaware. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., XX.

place of the railway workers within the historical record as a powerful purveyor of public opinion.

Further into his research, Jones dissects *why* the Senegal Valley region became the centerpiece of French interests within a colonial economy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, showing how this was a direct result of ecological interest in Senegal as “an important transshipment point for African traders moving between the river, the savannah and the forest.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to the desire to exploit the Upper Senegal River for trade expansion, Jones identifies two other primary goals behind the French economic interest in the Senegal Valley:

“One was their rivalry with the British, which extended to most parts of the globe. In West Africa, the British had bases [...] from which they launched their own expeditions into the interior. Despite a commercial treaty signed in 1870, British merchants prevented the French from operating on the lower Niger. By advancing from Senegal to the Middle Niger, the French hoped to bypass the British position downstream. [...] The French also expected their efforts to become economically self-sustaining if not profitable. [...] The Middle Niger Delta appeared well-suited for plantation export crops like cotton or rice. The most extravagant French predictions compared the future of the Niger River Valley to that of the American Midwest.”<sup>5</sup>

Here, Jones presents the French ambitions to explore, develop, and maximize West Africa for economic expansion within the race to pass Britain on the global stage.

As we can see through the research conducted by James A. Jones, the Senegal Valley represented an important connection point for the rail system imagined by the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 66-68.

French government at this period. Jock McCulloch, a historian at RIT in Melbourne, Australia, analyzed why the railway was the centerpiece for the colonial economy in his article “Trains, Coal, and Industrial Labor.” Jock describes the rail as “the intersection of European and African societies,” saying that, “they introduced new forms of labour, created markets, and generated capital.”<sup>6</sup> Jock explains that during the 1870s the French administration had desired a cross-Saharan rail to further their economic foothold within the African continent. He states, “The rail increased the demand for wage labour in the interior and allowed the easy importation of new commodities, which in turn brought wider economic change.”<sup>7</sup> McCulloch, through the analysis of three other historians’ writings on the topic, including James A. Jones, comes to the ultimate conclusion that there is a distinct interconnection between the path to a modern workspace taken and the lack of concern for the labor class demonstrated by the African rail workers in French West Africa.<sup>8</sup>

Transitioning to the Dakar-Niger Railway Strike of 1947-1948, Jones within “The Impact of the Dakar-Niger Railway” describes it as, “the largest, longest and most sophisticated in a long sequence of group actions that began during the first years of construction.”<sup>9</sup> Jones outlines a brief history of the notable strikes that occurred starting as early as 1890, increasing in scale and amount during the era of World War I and World War II, and ultimately culminating in the 1947-1948 Strike that the research

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<sup>6</sup> McCulloch, Jock. 2004. “Trains, Coal, and Industrial Labour.” *Africa (Edinburgh University Press)* 74 (2): 277–85. doi:10.3366/afr.2004.74.2.277

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

from Frederick Cooper determined to be over 20,000 people in totality across West Africa. Jones explains how the Dakar-Niger union began to form incorporating multiple levels of the largely class-based society together into a power unit that through the influence of upper-class Africans who worked alongside the French were able incite a strike large enough to implement long term. According to Jones's analysis of the events, the socio-political movement "solidified into three major movements, the anti-colonial RDA, the PSP which supported the administration, and the *Indépendents d'Outre Mer*."<sup>10</sup> These movements, in Jones perspective, would all contribute to the decline in colonial power and the rise of a new interterritorial political consciousness demonstrated by 1947-1948 Dakar-Niger Rail Strike.<sup>11</sup>

Jones years later in his book *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World*, expands this conclusion going as far to claim:

"World War II provided the [French] administration with a pretext for postponing change, but by the time the debate resumed in late 1945, the stakes were much higher and the number of participants, much larger. The 1947-1948 railroad strike provided a watershed in French labor policy by reaffirming the connections that existed between railroad workers and the population from which they came. It showed that despite decades of effort to "industrialize" Africans, wage earners remained linked to their society in ways that could oppose French assimilation."<sup>12</sup>

Jones, here, places a massive amount of importance on the World War II era on the creation of conditions allowing this watershed to occur. The impact of the 1947-1948

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 347.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, James A. 2002. *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World: Workers of the Chemin de Fer Dakar-Niger, 1881-1963*. Heinemann. 64.

strike is seen throughout the following decades, according to Jones, through the ways the labor class held connection to the African community despite strong French efforts to assimilate workers. Noteworthy about *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World* in contrast to the previous work by Jones “The Impact of the Dakar-Niger Railway” is that in *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World*, Jones utilizes a more traditional Western approach relying on archival sources and the works of other historians as foundation for his conclusions. These conclusions reached by Jones heavily support those reached through oral sourcing in “The Impact of the Dakar-Niger Railway” despite a drastic change to the approach taken by Jones in this analysis.

Historian and Anthropologist Dennis Cordell analyzed the arguments made by Jones within the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* that brings forward many interest points from Jones that otherwise would not have been apparent. Cordell looks at the work of Jones through an economic lens, and almost at times presents his arguments through an environmental perspective as well. Cordell brings forward the importance of tropical disease as a factor in explaining why the French were willing to overcome prejudices held against African laborers that was often discussed within *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World*. Cordell praises Jones for filling in gaps surrounding the understanding of the Dakar-Niger Rail Strike of 1947-1948 discussing how the emphasis placed on advanced preparations by union leaders and their anticipation throughout the process is not necessarily prevalent in the greater historical

understanding.<sup>13</sup> The most important contribution to Cordell adds to Jones's analysis within his article is when he says:

“[*Industrial Labor in the Colonial World*] fills in several major gaps in our understanding of the Chemin de Fer Dakar-Niger and the strike of 1947-48. It provides a set of larger contexts that makes it easier to connect the railroad and the work stoppage to the larger themes of industrialization in Europe, France, and the colonies. [...] about how we understand and identify with the past; about how we put together the truth(s) of novelist and the truth(s) of the historian.”<sup>14</sup>

Cordell extrapolates from the Dakar-Niger Railway Strike of 1947-1948 a better understanding of the relationship between narrative and history integral to African history. This understanding of the importance of narrative dives deep into the greater culture within Africa during the colonial era Cordell and Jones are analyzing.

In a similar manner to Jones in *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World*, historians Philip Curtain and Steven Feierman analyze the broad impact of social change across Africa connecting the various labor movements together in their work *African History*. *African History* serves as an all-encompassing historical analysis of Africa through the era of independence in the mid-to-late 1900s. Within a chapter on social change during the post-war period, they state:

“The French had been learning since the 1930s that a work force built on migrant or casual labor was potentially dangerous. They had learned this [...] in the French West African Dakar general strike of 1946 and railway strike of 1947-8. Workers who moved back and forth between the workplace and other occupations were able to mobilize the help of the

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<sup>13</sup> Cordell, Dennis D. 2003. “Industrial Labor in the Colonial World: Workers of the Chemin de Fer Dakar-Niger, 1881-1963 (Book).” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 36 (3): 635–39. doi:10.2307/3559437. 637

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 639

wider community in times of trouble. [...] strikers were able to hold out for long periods because they received material support from non-workers.”<sup>15</sup>

Curtain and Feierman echo the sentiments Jones holds that the Dakar-Niger Rail Strike held an important role in the community aspect of the political unrest. They build upon the intersection of the railway and community building with highlighting the importance workers commuting back and forth to the workplace plays. Because there was an increased flow of workers into developing areas within the colonial region, Curtain and Feierman go on to explain, “After the Second World War, colonial government and businesses invested in urban ports, docks, housing, and factories.”<sup>16</sup> The push for urbanization fueled the labor class to continue their fight for stability within the economy eventually forcing the hand of the British and French. Curtain and Feierman describe their actions as almost opposites, the British instituted legalized trade unions that allowed structured benefits for labor workers while the French attempted to fragment workers and created a system of benefits for only the highest-skilled workers closest to the French support.<sup>17</sup>

This deliberate effort to slow movement towards political representation during the post-war era in West Africa was successful until 1946 when limited inclusion began through representation in the National Assembly in Paris.<sup>18</sup> Curtain describes the political parties that emerged as representation in the National Assembly as “quasi-

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<sup>15</sup> Curtin, Philip, Steven Feierman, Leonard Thompson, and Jan Vansina. 1995. “African History from Earliest Times to Independence.” In *African History from Earliest Times to Independence*, 1. 505-506.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 509.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 510.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 522.



federations of local parties,” continuing, “the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) was the strongest and most broadly based of these early alliances.”<sup>19</sup> Considering the analysis of James A. Jones on the impact of the 1947-1948 Rail Strike, the RDA was able to establish its broad base through popular movements like labor strikes.

It is particularly noteworthy that both Jones and Curtain come to similar conclusion regarding the growth of political representation in West Africa due to how their research differs. Jones early on in “The Impact of the Dakar-Niger Railway” states, “Previous scholars interviewed railway workers only to supplement research based largely on colonial archives. My research included 48 documented interviews [...] with a large variety of people related by their proximity to the railway.”<sup>20</sup> The books *African History* by Curtain and *Industrial Labor in the Colonial World* by Jones rely on very traditional Western methodology within its sources, primarily using other Western academics. This would indicate that it might fall into the trap Jones seems to present in this quote from his research, however, both of their findings resulted in similar conclusions about the importance of the labor movements when it comes to the economic impact on French West Africa.

At the beginning of this historiography, I used a quote from Historian Frederick Cooper regarding the scale of the labor movement from his work *‘Our Strike’: Equality, Anticolonial Politics, and the 1947-48 Railway Strike in French West Africa*. I mention this again because Cooper, similarly to Jones, is a firm believer that there is a disconnect

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, James A. 1995. “The Impact of the Dakar-Niger Railway on the Middle Niger Valley.” Order No. 9540520, University of Delaware. 4.

between the representation and the reality of African history when examining it through a 'traditional' Western lens. Cooper's article '*Our Strike*' is the amalgamation of testimonies collected across Senegal during a research project conducted in the mid-1990s. These testimonies, Cooper uses to express the importance of oral sourcing when evaluating African history because his work actual determines a different legacy of the relationship between the labor movements and the struggle for political independence.

Cooper defines the goal of labor unions follow 1946 as "the creation of a *cadre unique*, a single scale of wages and benefits for Africans and white Frenchmen alike."<sup>21</sup> Cooper explains this system would expand the gap between social classes, however he then states:

"In political terms one can argue the opposite: to the extent that the strike movement drew from anticolonial sentiments that went beyond the workplace and to the extent that the strike gave Africans a sense of empowerment in their confrontations with the French government, anticolonial politics risked diluting the work-centered goals of the strike movement. The idea of independence would sever the French connection which was the ideological basis for the railway men's claims to equality of wages and benefits with French workers, while opening the union's considerable organizational achievements to co-optation by political parties whose primary concern lay elsewhere."<sup>22</sup>

Within this claim, Cooper essentially states that he believes the integration of the independence movement within the labor movement presents a major weakness. The strength of the growing political representation through the RDA was rooted in the

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<sup>21</sup> Cooper, Frederick. "'Our Strike': Equality, Anticolonial Politics and the 1947-48 Railway Strike in French West Africa." *The Journal of African History* 37, no. 1 (1996): 81–118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/183289>, 81-118. 82.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

labor movement as historians Curtain and Jones both have showed. Cooper thus feels that expansion of this newfound political representation to encompass the independence movement has a negative impact on the strength of the labor movement. By “diluting the work-centered goals,” Cooper’s research leads him to believe there is a long-standing strain on the relationship between the two political movements<sup>23</sup>. During an interview conducted by Cooper, a former railway man “denied that the ‘spirit of independence’ was behind the strike; the central issue was ‘respect of professional value’”.<sup>24</sup> These sentiments held nearly fifty years after the events of the strike strongly support Cooper’s belief in a strained relationship between the two movements that in many historical analyses is looked at as one integrated movement.

Cooper’s research is a very interesting representation of how oral sourcing can produce drastically different interpretations of the same events as highlighted by the previous statement. A railway worker who lived a long time reflecting on the events of the 1947-1948 strike determining that independence is not the root cause of the movement largely counters the conclusions made in research both by Jones using an oral-based African perspective and Curtain using a Western-archival based perspective. These differentiating outcomes of historical analysis highlights an issue that often emerges within the greater context of African history regarding how to integrate and utilize oral sourcing, as well as where does oral sourcing place itself within the hierarchy

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 115.

of priority when researching historical events like the 1947-1948 Rail strike occurred without formal historical recording.

Conclusion:

Throughout the analysis of 1947-1948 Dakar-Niger Rail Strike, historians pinpoint the interconnection between the growing labor movements and the rising independence movement as the center of the strike's strength. The Dakar-Niger Strike highlighted a developing sense of African community that was beginning to integrate across multiple aspects of life during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through the scale and reliance on Africans outside the working class for support. This combined with the end of World War II in the 1940s formed the perfect storm through which the labor class was able to utilize its newfound strength to contest the colonial authorities that had restricted their rights for decades. The works of historians like Jones and Curtin emphasize the position of the expanded labor class as a catalyst for community-sized change within the colonial landscape highlighting the rise of political representation within French West Africa resulting from the influence labor strikes held over the colonial economy.

Despite differences in the methodologies taken by various historians over the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century in analyzing these events, consistent conclusions tend to prevail. The socio-economic conditions created by the World War period established a foundational sense of unity within a growing labor class that ultimately held a large role in the breakdown of the colonial economy established by France in West Africa. The

Dakar-Niger Railway was at the heart of French expansion and economic domination across Africa through the early portion of the 1900s, therefore the impact of the Dakar-Niger Rail Strike of 1947-1948 cannot be understated.

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