

THE BROKEN PROMISES OF PRIVATIZATION: SYSTEMIC CONTRADICTIONS OF A GLOBAL POLICY IN THE TOLE TEA ESTATE OF CAMEROON SINCE THE 1990S

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ABSTRACT

The economic crisis of the 1980s and 90s saw the developing economies of the south opening up to the Breton Woods and the Washington consensus on peripheral economies. This consensus was the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) that was fashioned to drag African and other Third World economies out of economic doldrums. Privatization was considered a remedy to maladjustments that provoked economic depression. The benefits of this venture were overestimated because in most of the countries where it was experimented including Cameroon as whole and the Tole Tea Estate in particular, the results were far from encouraging. Those who followed the prescriptions of privatization endured the austerity. The employers and owners of capital might be quite happy as they see their profits soar but the workers in this estate who are mostly women have experienced very poor working condition- long and exhaustive working hours, poor living conditions in the camps and nonpayment of salary arrears. This contravenes the promises and supposed benefits of privatization. Privatization unaccompanied by an appropriate regulatory structure; competition policies and oversight to ensure that monopoly powers are not abused is an almost recipe for economic instability that has characterized the Tole Tea Estate in the post crisis years. The workers are constantly on strikes in reaction to poor working conditions and the purported wage slavery. This paper is a means through which to understand the diverse experiences of marginalized labor under the privatization scheme. The participant/observer approach and oral history techniques were employed to gather first hand information. This approach is the most appropriate because this researcher have lived through the events in the estate.

INTRODUCTION

Africa as whole and Cameroon in particular in the mid 1980s and 90s witnessed an unprecedented magnitude of economic failures. This was attributed to the narrow-based economic infrastructure that was inherited from colonialism. One of the stigmas of colonialism was the agricultural oriented economies that were imposed on the peripheral African states. The reliability of these economies on external demands exposed them to uncontrollable shocks which could not be avoided. The main argument for these economic down trends of the 1980s and 90s was the drastic drop in the prices of agricultural products in the World Market that had a serious ripple effect on the fragile economies. The functioning of the international exchange system in which Cameroon and other staple product countries have found themselves as peripheral suppliers of raw materials have resulted to Cameroon ever worsening terms of trade and a poor economic spiral. This perpetual weak economic base is what has permanently kept the country under the dictates of the Breton Wood Institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. African Economies like that of Ivory Coast, Ghana and Cameroon were seriously affected by the negative outcomes that were registered at the level of world market operations in the 1980s and 90s. Ivory Coast was highly

dependent on cocoa production, just like Ghana that was also highly agricultural based and Cameroon that earned more than 70 percent of her gross national product from the Agricultural sector. Cameroon having scarcely recovered from the convalescence of her colonial dependence is still under foreign economic domination, to such an extent that trade balance to say the least borders upon a deficit.¹ The production of exportable goods is largely due to capital of foreign origin. The corresponding profits are not used for internal development because they are immediately repatriated to the countries of origin of the investor's thus encouraging capital flight. This position is corroborated by the present researcher when he argues that the idea of privatization of state owned corporations as enshrined in the Structural Adjustment Program was a welcomed initiative but with very disappointing consequences. The most glaring of these negative consequences of privatization was the fact that our state owned corporations all fell into foreign hands resulting in uncontrollable exportation of capital. This was because in the event of privatization, the bids were open to all and the weak local capital could not stand competition with the strong foreign capital.

In the case of Cameroon the agricultural enterprise was largely under government control. Immediately after independence, President Amadou Ahidjo, realizing the centrality of agriculture and given that Cameroon was lacking in technological and industrial development, he invested a lot of energy in trying to develop agriculture. It was against this back drop that he came up with the *Green Revolution Policy*.² The government actually set up agencies for the development of agric infrastructure like FONAIDE. This was a rural development agency that was created by the government with the sole responsibility of giving out agricultural loans to farmers.

Before imposing privatization as a remedy to the ever worsening economic situation, the Tole Tea Estate was under the management of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC).³ From 1947 till the early 1990s, the Tole Tea Estate was a unit of agro-industrial production under the CDC. The economic crisis that seriously affected economic performance in the country did not leave the corporation unaffected and it was poor performance in the Tea department that pushed the government to open up the tea sector for privatization. It was hoped that privatization was not only going to enhance productivity, but it was also going to improve on working conditions of labor in the estate and improve on the living standards and the general plight of the workers. The central theme of the current paper is to prop into the promises that accompanied privatization and to investigate whether these promises were actually fulfilled.

¹ Paul Bory (ed). The Political Bureau of the Cameroon National union. *As told by Ahmadou Ahidjo*. Monac, 1968.

² This was a policy that was instituted by the Cameroon Government under the patronage of President Amadou Ahidjou. And the prime objective was to ensure that agriculture was promoted at every level of the society. The government through this program dished out loans and encouraged farmers to ensure an always green territory. The concept of ever green underscored the continuous planting of agricultural products.

³ The CDC was created in 1947 by the British in their effort to indigenize colonial plantations and to ensure that the plantations were better managed for the best interest of the people of Cameroon.

The Colonial Origins of the Tole Tea Estate

German annexation of Cameroon and the subsequent penetration of the interior opened up the territory to external economic demands. These external demands necessitated the establishment of the plantation system and the Tea plantation around Tole was one of the sectors that were established. The creation of these agro-industrial plantations oriented the economy of Cameroon towards cash crop production that became the greatest foreign exchange earner. The cultivation of different varieties of crops like palm, rubber, cocoa and tea was not determined by local consumption but by external demand. The Tole Tea Estate therefore owes its establishment to colonial ambitions of maximally exploiting the colonies for the best interest of the colonial masters.

The location of this Tea plantation at the foot of Mount Cameroon was not only influenced by the availability of land equally the favorable climatic environment was a serious determinant. The cold climate around the Fako Mountain favored the growth of Tea around this location. Tea specifically was first experimented in Cameroon in 1928 when a tea seed bed was cultivated in the Botanic Garden in the former Victoria.⁴ Later about Twenty-six hectares of light leafed tea and the dark-leafed Manipuri tea were planted in Tole still for experimentation. These tea species that were imported from Asia and specifically from India by the Germans were tested and cultivation proved suitable. The experimental estate in Tole was abandoned for some time but after the Second World War, Tea was reactivated following the high demand for beverage in British Colonial West Africa.⁵ Cultivation was later expanded between 1942 and 1943 with the estate realizing over 600 Kgs of tea with very minimum equipment. 1947 to 1948 witnessed another period of decline in production. Cultivation dropped from 11,888kgs to 788kgs.⁶ This decline was due to neglect and low financial investment in the tea sector. When colonial plantations were indigenized in 1947 following the creation of the CDC, the management of Tole Tea Estate was handed over to the new corporation. It can therefore be observed from the foregoing that the Tole Tea Estate was a structure that was inherited from colonialism. One of the key problems that confronted the colonial managers of this estate was the inability to secure labor around the plantation location. They had to move for thousands of miles into the hinterlands to recruit labor.

The Labor Situation in the Tole Tea Estate before Privatization

As earlier mentioned, securing labor around the colonial plantations was quite very difficult. And a good number of arguments have been advanced for this unavailability of labor along the coast where plantations were located. The first argument that has been raised by many scholars is that the coastal indigenes considered plantation labor to be another form of slave labor.⁷ This was because they witnessed how demanding and tedious plantation labor was. The lukewarm attitude of the coastal inhabitants towards plantation work was further aggravated by their early involvement in the cultivation of cash crops as small scale operators and again their involvement in colonial maritime trade as middlemen and independent operators. These activities provided them with a regular source of income and again they

⁴ National Archive Buea (NAB) File No. Qd/a1966/1 Report on the Plantations by Dr. Unwin, 1954. P.11

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ Ibid.p.19

⁷ Ndeh Martin Sango. " Labour Migration and Crisis of Identity: the case of Migrant Labour in the Semi-Urban Plantation Settlements of the Littoral Quadrant of Cameroon." In *African Journal of Humanities and Society: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Society*. Vol.12 Number 1 April 2011. P.26.

could through these operations secure the colonial currency that was needed for tax payments. Early external trade therefore created a new class of operators within the coastal milieu known as the comprador trading bourgeoisie. This class contended that their endeavors were more easily rewarded by overseas commerce in which they acted as intermediary agents than by plantation labor.⁸ Another argument that has been raised by other scholars is that the coastal indigenes deliberately refused to cede their labor to the Germans as a way of protesting the expropriation of their lands. With the coastal inhabitants more inclined to trade and independent cultivation, it was difficult to get labor around the coast.

Exterior Labor Sources in the Tole Tea Estate

The reluctance of the coastal indigenes to engage in plantation labor and the inability of the tea operators to get cheap labor in the surrounding environment pushed the tea operators into the interior in search of labor. It was against this backdrop that so many recruitment missions were sent to different directions of the hinterland with German explorers like Zintgraff contracting agreements with prominent Fons like Galega 1 of Bali-Nyonga geared towards moving labor down to the plantations.

The process of moving up the hinterlands to sign labour recruitment contracts with the traditional rulers was inherited by the British from the Germans after the World War 1. Several recruitment campaigns were carried out by the British in the interior. Colonial entrepreneurs were forced by circumstances to depend on migrant labor. This trend has continued till date because statistics of labor in the Tea plantations indicate that a majority of laborers in the Tole Tea Estate were migrants from the Bamenda hinterlands and Francophone Cameroon. During the colonial era, foreign labor was carted from Nigeria and other areas like Ubangi Sharia.

The Gender Construct of Labor in the Tole Tea Estate

Labor in the Tole Tea estate was dominated by women. It was in a bit to overcome the problem of labor shortages in the Tole Tea plantations that the CDC officially embarked on the recruitment of women on a permanent basis from 1958. The ambition of this policy was seen as a solution to shortage of male hands in some arduous but vital tasks like tapping of rubber and the plucking of tea. The second goal was to redress the problem of labor fluctuation permanently. It was hoped that the men would be encouraged to stay longer in the plantations if their wives or spouses also had the opportunity to make a steady income as plantation workers.⁹

In another vain, the CDC in the Tole Tea Estate preferred female labor on the assumption that by nature women were passive and subservient. Women were falsely assumed to be more docile and complacent than men in the plantation system. In all the fear was that men could be more prone to strikes than women given that the Tea operators were aware that that the treatment they were giving their workers was not the best. The implication of the assumed subservient of women by management was that they would exploit the services of women. Again it was erroneously assumed that wage employment was a more significant event in the lives of women than that of men. After all, were women not excluded from the colonial

⁸Ibid.,

⁹ Report of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, 1980.

capitalist scheme of things when only their men were driven into plantations? Furthermore, it was reasoned that wage employment gave women a degree of freedom from patriarchal control. This was because it empowered them financially.¹⁰ Hence, given the opportunity many women flocked into Tole for work.

Apart from the above, some external factors influenced the CDC decision to recruit women on the Tea plantation at Tole. Expatriate managers of the CDC were a major factor in the decision to involve women on the Tole Tea Estate. Through their experience in the tea plantations of Asia, they knew that women mainly did tea plucking. Rightly or wrongly, women were considered expert pluckers because of their nibble fingers; that is, women could easily harvest tea leaves as they were used to harvesting vegetables. Consequently, tea plucking in many parts of the world came to be identified as women's activity.¹¹ Based on this Asian experience, CDC management came to believe that tea plucking in Cameroon was an occupation for women. The irrationality of these assumptions notwithstanding, the Tole Tea Estate witnessed a high influx of female labor to the extent that the female labor population in the estate went up to 63 percent. The unbalanced gender construct of labor in the Tole Tea estate did not in any way impact on the poor working conditions of labor in the estate. Whether male or female, the workers generally witnessed debased working conditions in the estate.

The Plight of Labor and Wage Slavery before Privatization of the Estate

Before the creation of the CDC and the indigenization of the tea sector, Tole Tea was directly under expatriates who decided what was to be cultivated and when. These foreign operators saw profit maximization as their ultimate goal and bothered very little about the working conditions and the plight of labor. Salary scales did not in any way reflect the input of the workers because labor toiled for long hours and received very minimal sums.¹² The working conditions and living standards during this period were deplorable. This under privileged conditions of work was noticed in long and exhaustive working hours coupled with very poor living conditions, accompanied by very poor wages. The pay rates as of 1963 did not reflect labor inputs given the very long and exhaustive working hours. (for details on salary scales see table1 below).

Table 1: Rates of Pay of daily employment on the Tole Tea Estate as of 1st October 1963.

Category of Workers	Daily Wages (FCFA)
Male Workers	135
Female Workers	118
Artisans	
Class iii	320
Class ii	450
Class i	615
Assistant Overseers	
Male	198

¹⁰ Piet, konings. " Women Plantation Workers and Economics Crisis in Cameroon." In *Shobhita Jain and Reddock* (eds), *Women Plantation Workers, International Experiences*. Oxford, New York: Oxford International Publishers Ltd, 1998, 156.

¹¹ Buea National Archives (BNA) File No. MTPS/SWP/BU.95/S.I., Vol. ix. Complaints from the CDC

¹² Interview with Mr. Fonguh Sunday, a retired Tea Harvester. 13th of April, 2013.

Female	171
Headman	
Male	156
Female	130
Time Keepers	173
Checkers	145

Source: Personnel Circular No.5, Rates of Daily pay of employees effective from 1st October, 1963, Bota, CDC Division 1963.

Given that the hours of work were excessively long because the workers actually worked in two shifts of about eight hours per shift the pay rates were grossly incommensurate to the labor inputs. The workers were generally exploited at the different categories but with some categories worst exploited than others. Women were even more exploited than the men. In the Tole Estate, a majority of the female workers worked in the Field and were classified under general labor. This was because most of them had not gone beyond the First School Living Certificate or acquired any professional training.¹³ The female field workers were placed on 118 FCFA a day and it was clear that Sundays were not counted as working days. Thus on monthly basis, these female field workers were on salaries ranging from 30,680 FCFA to 31, 186 FCFA depending on whether the month was thirty or thirty-one days. This kind of experience could be likened to the arguments of Karl Marx in his defense of labor in the Communist Manifesto when he argued that out of the 8/8 labor inputs in the factory system, only 1/8 is handed back to labor in the form of wage slavery and 7/8 is ploughed back into the capitalists' machinery in the form of profits.¹⁴ This was exactly the situation that prevailed at Tole because labor was subjected to long and tedious working conditions with very little remunerations. Part of their benefits were stripped off from them and reinvested in the expansion of the estate and profit maximization.

According to some of the workers that were contacted during field work, for every 24 hours in a day, they spent at least 18 hours either harvesting tea or pruning over grown sections. In the colonial plantation system and the Tole Tea Estate in particular, the instrument of labor became a means of enslaving, exploiting and impoverishing labor. The social conditions and organization of labor processes was turned into an organized mode of crushing out the workman's individual vitality, freedom and independence, (Konings, 1993). From the foregoing, it is clear that the plight of labor was seen to be secondary and of primary importance was how profit could be maximized even at the expense of labor.

Gender Disparity in Labor Remunerations

What was very noticeable was the disparity that existed between the Male and Female labor in terms of wages. The differences existed until 1968 when some attempts were made to harmonize workers' wages in the CDC plantations. On the 15th July 1968, Decree No. 68/DF/272 introduced the Federal Labor Code harmonizing wages.¹⁵ It defined the minimum wages for agricultural and non-agricultural workers in Cameroon Though three wage zones were established, the CDC signed a bilateral agreement with CDC Workers Union to

¹³ Ndeh Martin Sango and Damien Akara. "The Politics of Labour Remuneration at Tole Tea Estate: A Critical Analysis of Femal Labour, 1958-2002". Tropical Focus: the International Journal Series on Tropical Issues, Vol. 12 Number1 April 2011. P.7.

¹⁴ Karl Marx. The Communist Manifesto, Gateway Edition p.13

¹⁵ CDC Annual Report and Account for the year ending 1968. This was also spelt out in Section 61 of the Labour Code (Law No.92-007 of 14th August 1992).

maintain a uniform wage structure for all its workers without any gender disparities. Tea pluckers were to be equated to zone 11 of the primary sector, (Konings, 1993:42). The monthly earnings of the Tea pluckers remained extremely low and in commensurate to their input.

The financial situation of the workers in the Tole Estate became precarious following the economic crisis that hit Cameroon as from the Mid 1980s. As part of management's strategy to counter the crisis, workers' wages were slashed. This seriously affected their living standards and other living conditions in the estate. As a result of the economic down trends, unlike in 1986 when no hospital maintenance fees were paid, workers were now obliged to save Fcfa 1,680 per month as from 1991. Furthermore, workers were obliged to save Fcfa 3955 from their wages. Apart from the health care saving scheme, many other saving schemes were introduced. All these compulsory saving schemes were to help in running of affairs of the CDC until its financial situation improved. This brought inconveniences and further inflicted pain on the workers particularly workers who had an alternative means of saving their money like local *Njangi* Houses. The foregoing describes the extent to which the estate survived because of exploitation of the working class.

Debased Living Conditions as a factor of Labor Exploitation

The living conditions of the workers in the camps at Tole were very deplorable. The camp houses were plank structures that were poorly constructed thus exposing the workers to mosquitoes and other harmful environmental insects. Complaints of rats and snakes were also very common among the workers. In the camps that were visited by this scholar for sociological inquiries workers were asked if they had any complaints concerning their housing conditions. The questions were weighted towards eliciting complaints in order that quite trivial defects could be mentioned. A cross section of the workers interviewed, complained of congestion as a major problem. The average persons per room were up to six and this could be explained by the fact that a man that was married to one wife or many wives was entitled to only one room that was a sitting room and at the same time a kitchen and a bedroom. This congestion was not only noted in the living rooms but equally in the toilet and bathroom facilities that were in the camp. There were common toilets for all the men and for the women.

Apart from congestion that was reported, the houses were sub-standard. There were poorly ventilated and because of poor maintenance, the workers equally complained of leaking roofs.

Privatization and Expectant Results

In the 1980s and 1990s, a liberal democratic ethos infused the thinking on the appropriate politico-economic reforms to support Africa's economic recovery. The large aid donors, the multinational financial agencies and reluctantly or not African governments subscribed to this new consensus.¹⁶ A liberal state enabled by capacity-building initiatives and disciplined by democratic politics will always maintain the legal, administrative and economic framework for private capital accumulation. The public sector in the industrialized democracies of the North, communist countries and the Third World alike had become major and often

¹⁶ Richard Sandbrook. *The Politics of Africa's Economic Recovery*. London: Cambridge University Press. 1945 p21

inefficient consumers of resources.¹⁷ The Breton wood institutions argued that unemployment and poverty existed in the Third World because of high wages and over loaded public services. This explains why in their proposed structural adjustment mechanisms they prescribed salary cuts, reduction of the size of the public service and the selloff of state-owned monopolies to private firms as remedies to the debased economies. The IMF policies in part based on the out worn presumption that markets by themselves lead to efficient outcomes has failed to allow desirable government interventions.¹⁸ Many of these Third World Governments run very high budget deficits that appear to contribute little to growth and welfare, while feeding inflationary pressures. In Africa in particular scholars and other critiques have often been so critical of their governments for wastefulness, rapacity and capriciousness.

In an attempt to seek solutions to the foregoing problems that affected the Third world economies, their governments subscribed to the international bureaucrats and the structural adjustment facilities. These international financial agencies adhered to the fact that rejuvenated and reformed African economies were not only going to safeguard economic growth but it was going to diversify their industrial enterprise and encourage international investors. Principal amongst the proposed terms for Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) was the privatization of state monopolies. The intent of this private system was to maximize profit, limit risk and achieve stabilized economic growth. It was these proposed terms that pushed the government of Cameroon into opening up certain sectors of the CDC for private enterprise with the Tea sector as the first.

Privatization of the Tole Tea Estate and Indigenous Opposition

The idea of privatization raised a lot of ill feelings amongst the indigenous inhabitants and labor. Even though working under deplorable conditions the workers were not very sure of the future and consequently opposed any move that was taken by the government to privatize the tea estate. And like it is often said that it is good to deal with the devil you know rather than an angel you don't know; the local population around Tole fought against the move to privatize the estate with the intention of protecting their land. The dissatisfaction of the indigenous populace was echoed in the series of petitions that were written to the government by the Bakweri Land Committee and other interest groups around Tole. With the government hesitant to reverse their bid for privatization, the land committee had to go to the international court in a bit to preserve their land. This local resistance pushed the government to adopt measures to convince the local population to accept privatization as a move that was going to bring positive results. Prominent among the measures taken by the government were the campaigns that were organized aimed at cajoling the workers to understand that this new dispensation was going to be accompanied by improved working conditions and increased salary. These strategies were employed to grease the privatization machinery.

Arguments Advanced by the Government in Favour of Privatization

In the early 1990s and the 2000s a liberal democratic ethos infused the thinking on the appropriate politico-economic reforms to support the recovery of peripheral economies including that of Cameroon. The large aid donors, the multinational financial agencies and reluctantly or not African governments subscribed to this new consensus, (Konings, 2004). A

¹⁷ Ibid.,

¹⁸ Joseph Stiglitz *Globalization and its discontents*. Will Hutton Guardian, n.d .p.41

liberal state, enabled by capacity-building initiatives and disciplined by democratic politics will always maintain the legal, administrative and economic framework for private capital accumulation. By the 1990s, the public sector in Africa and other Third World countries alike had become major and often inefficient consumers of resources. The Breton woods argued that unemployment and poverty existed because of poor management, high wages and overloaded public sectors. This explains why in putting together their structural adjustment package (SAP), underscored salary cuts, reduction of the sizes of the public sector and the selloff of government monopolies as important remedies. The IMF policies in part based on the out worn presumption that markets by themselves lead to efficient outcomes has failed to allow desirable government intervention, (Stiglitz, n.d). Many Third World governments run very high budget deficits that appear to contribute little to growth and welfare, while feeding inflationary pressures. In Africa in particular, scholars and outspoken critiques have often expressed their disgust on the wastefulness, rapacity and capriciousness manifested by their governments.

It was against the backdrop of this new order that emerged in the 1990s that Cameroon subscribed to the international bureaucrats and their SAP. The international financial agencies adhered to the fact that rejuvenated and reformed African economies through privatization and other prescriptions of SAP will not only safeguard economic growth but will diversify their industrial enterprise and encourage international investor. The arguments raised by the government of Cameroon in pursuit of their privatization arrangements were that it was going to maximize profit, limit risk and achieve stabilized economic growth given the politico-economic environment in which it must operate. It was in anticipation of the foregoing that the government of Cameroon opened up certain sectors of the CDC for private enterprise including the Tole Tea Estate. It is the opinion of this researcher that privatization was only a calculated attempt to open up the economy of Cameroon to foreign capital because there was no way for national capital to stand competition with foreign capital in the event of privatization. A very small number of nationals could afford the required capital purchase the sectors that were put in the market for sale.

The Broken Promises of Privatization

The anticipated benefits of privatization never saw the light of the day. Since the privatization of the Tole Tea Estate in 2002, the estate has witnessed a serious decline in output and this has been due to the frequent and incessant strikes due to poor working conditions and poor living standards of the workers. During the negotiations privatize the estate, the government did not sell the estate for close to nothing but it equally failed to protect the interest of the workers. The privatization of Tole Tea Estate became a national scandal when it was evident that the negotiators had stroke a deal that was going to benefit only a handful of politically well-connected elites at the expense of the public treasury.¹⁹ From information gathered in the field, a few individuals hijacked the privatization of the TTE for their selfish interest. According to Konings, the privatizations were masterminded by John Niba Ngu (a former CDC General Manager and Minister of Agriculture) who was known to be a close aid of President Paul Biya.²⁰

It was easy for the common man to discover the intrigues that clouded the privatization of this estate because in advertizing the estate for sale, the government made it clear that the

¹⁹ Piet, Konings. "Privatization and Ethno-regional protest in Cameroon" Africa Spectrum. Vol. 38, 1 2003. P.57.
²⁰²⁰ Ibid.,

highest bidder and the most likely purchaser was a South African Consortium Brobon Finex PTY. However, this was not the case because the estate ended up in the hands of Alhaji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo who is a business baron and another close aid of the Presidency of the Republic.²¹ The critiques of the government and her privatization scheme accused the government of hypocrisy that increased public discontent.

A further justification that privatization was not geared at public interest is the fact that the estate was sold for close to nothing. Before privatizing the estate, experts had evaluated it at FCFA 3.2 Billion. But this estate was finally sold out for 1.5 Billion less than half the price evaluated by experts. In a short period of Three Months after privatization, the Cameroon Tea Estate (CTE) as it now became sold tea for close to 4.6 Billion, more than triple the price for which the estate was purchased.²² In return for an excellent deal, the CTE board allocated Ngu a 5 percent of the Company's share and capital and appointed him the General Manager with a monthly salary and fringe benefits of up to 4 Million FCFA.

Still on the broken promises of privatization, it is important to mention that the situation of the workers in the estate moved from bad to worst. Despite all the vain promises made by the government as advantages of privatization, the CTE management did not in any way see the plight of labour as a priority. Instead of improving on the salaries and working conditions of the workers, there was retrogression because the salaries of workers were slashed by 50 percent without justifications and the management was not able to pay leave claims for 2003, 2004 and 2005.²³ Privatization proved even worse than the proponents of this new order had predicted. Far from the slashed incomes that were granted workers, living conditions in the camps degenerated. The improved medical and health conditions that were promised the workers were not forthcoming. A growing divide between the have and the have-nots left increasing numbers in the estate in dire poverty.

Apart from the above unfulfilled promises, CTE came and lay off many workers without any retirement benefits. For example Joyce Dinga, a senior Field Assistant in the estate confirmed that the CTE maintained only 99 permanent workers out of the over 800 that existed under the CDC. The CTE operated with a free hand because in the course of privatizing the estate, the government failed to protect the interest of the workers and other stakeholders. The high aspirations following privatization were largely unrealized, instead the workers were plunged deeper into misery as incomes living standards became a nightmare in the estate.

Incessant Strikes as a manifestation of the Ugly side of Privatization in the estate

With increasing uncertainty and hopelessness, the workers decided to embark on strike actions. If privatization had not succeeded to reduce poverty, neither had it succeeded in ensuring stability. It instead created a scene of conflict and economic turmoil because of the incessant strike actions. Strikes were organized in an attempt to force CTE management to comply with the workers demands. The first strike started in March 2006 and lasted for three weeks during which the workers marched to the governor of the South West Region to present their plight. They got to the governor's cabinet carrying placard with captions reading "Baba must go"²⁴, "pay our money", "we want CDC back" and "carry your tea away and

²¹ The Post Newspaper Friday April 28 2006, p.3

²² Ibid.,

²³ The Post Newspaper Monday March 13 2006, p.8

²⁴ Baba here is referring to Alhaji Baba Ahmadou Danpullo who purchased the Tea Estate.

leave our land”.²⁵ During the early days of the strike, the workers usually reported to work at 6 am but refused to work. They usually hung around in clusters until Noon when they departed home for other subsistence farming activities. The workers confirmed that the strikes were aimed at crippling the estate but was meant to force management to commune with them and look into their dehumanized conditions. For example John Ache, one of the workers pointed out that since the estate was sold to CTE, the workers had never seen Baba Danpullo who happens to be the rightful owner of the estate. Hence the workers requested his presence in any attempt to resolve the deadlock. The workers further decried the fact that the company was making enormous profits but was unwilling/unable to pay their meager dues. This March strike was followed by other strike actions with the July 2006 strike that saw the workers occupying the CDC Head Office at Bota for close to Two Weeks.²⁶ It was common place to see old women of 60 years and above, who were tea pluckers sitting in front of the the Regional delegation of Labour in Buea for several weeks asking for their dues to be paid. When the workers discovered that the sit-down strike was not yielding the required results, they decided to resort to violence. The workers intended to force their way into the tea factory to stop work and also to stop vehicles from transporting tea out of the factory. The striking workers did not take rumours of ferrying tea out of the factory kindly. In a knee-jerk reaction, the workers rallied forces and stormed the factory.²⁷ The workers who numbered over Three Hundred defied warning shots from the men in uniform that were brought in to quell the riot. The tyres of trucks in the factory were deflated. This opened up confrontations between the striking workers and the military. Two military officers were seriously injured. The military men later discovered the firm resolves of the workers to channel their grievances and decided to call off action and promised not to ferry any tea out of the factory. This did not placate the workers who still went to the camp and attacked the homes of some security guards.

After this show down of the workers, several other attempts were made to ferry tea out of the factory but all ended in fiasco. One of the Field Assistants in the estate-Blasius Musoke was accused by management of supporting the workers. Attempts to get him arrested were frustrated by workers who gave him maximum protection. The workers on their part suspected the Chief of Tole village –Chief Robery Njanje of conniving with Baba Danpullo to forestall their legitimate aspirations. On Wednesday 26th April 2006, the workers marched to the Chief’s Palace at Biyuku and warned him to hands off the issue else he was to incur their asperity. These frequent confrontations between management and the workers grounded the estate for close to Four Months and tea was allowed to grow wild. With these frustrations, the workers resorted to calling on the government to regain management of the tea estate or else Baba Danpullo should carry away his tea and leave native land.

The Tole Tea Saga and Government’s Involvement

The first step that was taken by the government in trying to bring this crisis to rest was the involvement of the Senior Divisional Officer of Fako, Okala Bilai. He summoned a crisis meeting of the labourers and the CTE management. This meeting of 14th March 2006 ended with a resolution that the workers were going to be paid their arrears and other dues on the 28th and 29th of March 2006 at the premises of the labour office, Buea and secondly work in the estate was suspended for a period of Three Months. Most of the workers received this

²⁵ Martin Sango Ndeh, eye witness account March 8 2006 Buea.

²⁶ The Herald Newspaper Monday June 7 2006 p.3

²⁷ The Post Newspaper Friday June 28 2006

news with enthusiasm especially the female workers. Some of them left for Buea for payments as early as the 27th of March. To their greatest dismay no payments were effected as planned and frustration filled the atmosphere again. In anger the workers disrupted traffic and blocked the road linking Buea Town and Mile 17.²⁸ The road blocks were only dismantled upon the arrival of the Divisional Officer for Buea at the scene. The workers moved back to Tole and caused wanton destruction at the entrance to the tea factory and the workers in the factory were forced to escape.

Negotiations between the Regional Delegate of Labour and the striking workers continued. Mr. Kwa Diboa the labour representative mediated in the talks between CTE officials and the workers. On the 3rd of April, the CTE management issued a cheque of 14.9 Million that was to pay 312 workers whose names were published.²⁹ But the workers refused to receive the cheque in solidarity with others whose names were not included in the list of payments. Efforts to convince the workers to come to terms all failed. The workers continued their strike and on Friday 7th April 2006, the angry workers again blocked the road linking Tole and Buea. This seriously affected students that were to return to St. Joseph College Sasse and Bishop Rogan College Small Soppo for the second semester. Attempts by Rev. Father George Nkuo, then Catholic Education Secretary to convince the striking workers to allow children go to school failed.

The minister of Labour-Robert Nkili paid several working visits to Buea in an attempt to seek a long lasting solution to the crisis. He tried to convince the workers to return to work while solutions were proffered but these calls were received with mixed feelings and consequently the strike action continued. The last effort made by the government was the constitution of an inter-ministerial committee on Wednesday 12th April 2006. This committee was handed the responsibility of studying the crisis and providing solutions. This committee was composed of three ministries-the ministry of Economy and Finance, Secretary of State for Defense and the Ministry of Labour. No matter the proposals put forward by this committee, the certainty is that privatization created serious problems for the workers at the estate.

CONCLUSION

In assessing privatization as a remedy to the poor performance of public companies, it would be based on the set goals and promises that were advanced by the international bureaucrats as fall outs of the principle. In Africa as a whole and Cameroon in particular, the high aspirations accompanying the institution of SAP has been largely unfulfilled. Instead SAP and its conditionalities like privatization has plunged most of the continent deeper into misery as most of the parastatals and public corporations have lapse into retrenchment of workers, fall in income and declining living standards of the working class. The Tole Tea saga is a demonstration of the weaknesses of SAP. Since the privatization, labour has been confronted by the most dehumanized conditions of work. The promises of unprecedented prosperity instead brought unprecedented poverty in many respect. In most industrialized societies, workers in the private sector enjoy benefits and their working environment is usually conducive. These are societies with an organized labour code and guarantee of labour security. But in Africa as a whole and Cameroon in particular the reverse is true. Africans prefer the public service because their jobs and salaries are guaranteed. The private sector in Africa is very unstable because of poor labour canons. The case of Cameroon is very peculiar

²⁸ Martin Sango Ndeh. Eye witness account Buea, 29th March 2006.

²⁹ Ibid.,

because the labour code allows much to be desired. The labour code does not provide labour security and at the same time it exposes employees to exploitation because employers are given the free hand to negotiate salaries and working conditions with the employees. Privatization therefore becomes a very questionable alternative for societies with a fragile labour code. If privatization is aimed at enhancing growth and economic stability, it must be oriented towards addressing the plight of the working class.

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