Formerly enslaved people end apprenticeship practices in Trinidad, 1832-1838

May 1832 to August 1838

Country: Trinidad and Tobago
Location City/State/Province: Port of Spain
Location Description: Main protest took place in front of the Governor’s House

Goals:
Prevent the transition from slavery to the apprenticeship system such that all slaves would be entirely free on the date of emancipation

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 101. Refusal of impressed labor
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 110. Slowdown strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols → "Pas de six ans!"
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 110. Slowdown strike
- 142. Selective refusal of assistance by government aides

Methods in 4th segment:

- 110. Slowdown strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 110. Slowdown strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
110. Slowdown strike

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice
Human Rights

Group characterization:

- slaves/former slaves

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Not known
Partners:
Not known
External allies:
Not known

Involvement of social elites:
The closest to a social elite, of those who supported the resistance of the slaves, was Dr. Jean Baptiste Phillipe. He was the only black man to serve on the government Council. He wrote the resolution to end the apprenticeships that was subsequently passed.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
Not Known

Segment Length: 1 year

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Governor Grant, replaced on 20th April 1833 by Sir George Fitzgerald Hill, Colonel Hardy, Magistrates Council
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not Known

Campaigner violence:
Not Known

Repressive Violence:
Seventeen men were arrested and condemned to be flogged after one of the initial protests.

At a protest the next week, the magistrates convicted sixty persons, who were punished on Tuesday morning, 19 at the gaol and 33 at Marine Square.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
4 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The ultimate goal of ending the apprenticeships before the six years were up was achieved, but it took much longer than was hoped for. The government was able to maintain them after the first protests that had arisen when the transition was first to take place in 1834. It was not until after four more years of continued, but not entirely coordinated, small acts of disobedience and some protests that they were able to achieve that goal. However, they were the first British colony to end slavery altogether.

By 1830 the enslaved people in the “West Indian” colonies of the British Empire understood that slavery, as an institution, was about to fall. White abolitionists in Britain and around the world had been pushing legislation through the Parliament that would free all the enslaved in British colonies, and in 1833 the British government passed the Emancipation Bill and announced that it would bring an end to the practice of slavery beginning August 1, 1834. However, they included in the decision a stipulation that those who had been agricultural slaves would have to continue to work at their estates as “apprentices” for six years, while domestic slaves would receive their full freedom earlier, on August 1, 1838. This was the result of a compromise with plantation owners who fervently resisted the abolition and looked for ways to maintain domination. Under the new law, the "apprentices" would be compelled to work 40 hours of unpaid labour per week for their previous owners in exchange for food, clothing, lodging, and medical attendance.

Many of the enslaved feared that the new arrangement could become more dangerous because the compulsory contracts with the plantation owners meant that few options would be available for work after the six years were up.

Slave groups throughout Latin America and the Caribbean quickly caught on as the information about the act reached the various estates. In the years leading up to the announcement and the enactment of the Emancipation Bill, groups of slaves revolted in order to force the colonial governments to enforce full freedom in 1834. In Jamaica and other countries, this meant violence against the colonial troops and police who were employed to use their weapons to enforce the apprenticeships. However, in Trinidad the revolt took a nonviolent form.

In May of 1832, 81 of the enslaved organized a strike at the Plein Palais estate near Point-a-Pierre, to demand 3 days of the week to themselves. When British soldiers arrived to force the slaves back to work, 60 ran off into the woods to avoid capture and continue the strike by means of their absence. Some days later, 17 slaves went into town to visit the local mayor and explain their demands. They were sent back to the estate without satisfaction, but the Manager was ordered not to punish them. Only the
slave driver was punished with 39 lashes when they discovered that he had spread the rumor of the 3-day per week breaks, claiming that he was told by the Governor that this was to be the law. In between 1832 and 1834, countless small acts of defiance and runaways were noted as the slaves recognized that the end was coming. By 1833, there were more free men in Trinidad than slaves, 51% free and 49% slaves.

As the date of the transition from slavery to apprenticeships grew closer, the government became more nervous about the possible reactions from the slave population. On July 6, 1834, 25 days before the official change, Governor Hill addressed the soldiers of the Trinidad Militia and ordered that in the case that on August 1, the slaves conduct was not a quiet and orderly submission then all the equipment of the Militia must be prepared and discipline strictly enforced. On July 15th, the Governor printed an ad in the newspapers that explain how the process of abolition and the imposition of the apprenticeships would occur, urging all of the men, women, and children within the slave population to calmly comply. A week later, the national paper published articles further detailing the process and its significance. The writers emphasized the importance and necessity of the slow transition that in the end was a benefit for the slaves themselves. One article reported that “We have heard that there are white people in this island who are so wicked as to attempt to cheat you about this apprenticeship, by telling you that you cannot be made apprentices unless you choose to sign a paper to bind yourself. The men who do this are bad men. Do not be misled”. The article referred to the white abolitionists that had been organising discussions and developing a policy of nonviolent resistance with the slaves to overcome the apprenticeship rule.

Despite these efforts to mollify the resistance, on Tuesday, August 1, a large group of men, women and children of those subject to the act assembled before the Government House in Port of Spain to demand immediate freedom. When Governor Hill emerged and began to proclaim what would be the new order, a “young spokesman” for the group called out, “Did the King not granted us unqualified liberty from this date? We understand it so, and yet our managers and overseers insist that we work as usual this morning on the estates.” Governor Hill responded that they had been granted freedom and were no longer slaves, but the King had also specified that as a part of that agreement they must reside on their plantation for six more years as apprentices. He insisted that this was only for their benefit, to help them transition from being slaves to free British subjects.

Exactly at the moment that Governor Hill uttered the words ‘Six Years’, the crowd began to chant, “‘Pas de six ans, Point de six ans!” (No to Six Years, No more six years!), so loudly that the Governor could no longer be heard. He urged them to return home and return to their ‘avocations’, but they stayed and continued to chant. The Governor then sent out a magistrate to try to placate the crowd, but they only yelled louder, adding to their demands: “Pas de six ans, nous ne voulons pas de six ans, nous sommes libres, le Roi nous a donné la liberté!” (“Not six years, we will not have six years, we are free, the King has given us liberty!”)

The Members of Council lost patience and forcibly advised the Governor to declare Martial Law. Governor Hill turned to Colonel Hardy, the leader of the troops that were present at the protest, for his opinion. Hardy responded, “Martial Law!” “Against whom? I see only old men, women and children, poor ignorant people, who came to ask a question and know no better,” said Governor Hill. At the close of evening, Hill called the police to push the people out and the protest subsided for the night. In the next few days more and more people arrived in the town and refused to return to their masters. The magistrates then decided to make examples of some of the protesters by inflicting corporal punishment on a few of the stronger men, which resulted in a momentary end to the protest. On Saturday, however, the crowds grew even larger, and 17 men were charged by the magistrates for ‘riot’, that is for remaining in an assembly of three persons or more, ten minutes after being informed by the Magistrates that they were to move on. The seventeen were condemned to be flogged and as they were being taken to jail for punishment the crowds urged them not to submit to the punishment; they should fight to the death rather than return to work.

On Sunday, no one came to town, but on Monday the protesters returned. The magistrates convicted sixty persons, who were punished on Tuesday morning, 19 at the gaol and 33 at Marine Square. Few of the prisoners asked for pardon. Reporting on the events, the Gazette, the main newspaper in the country, wrote that the slave “like the Unionists (in Ireland) had been taught the power of passive resistance.” For a few days after the initial protests and repression, the “apprentices” returned to the estates and began to work; however in the following weeks and months, the estates noted a heightened level of disobedience among the workers, especially the women. The actions included “indolent performance at work, excessive insolence, breaking out of
hospital when sick, contumacious disobedience, and insolence and neglect of work.” All of these actions were punished with extra labor, whippings, and imprisonment, but the apprentices often refused to comply with them, refusing to receive their punishments.

As August 1, 1838, drew closer, the date for the complete emancipation of the domestic slaves, who constituted one third of the slave population in Trinidad, it became increasingly clear that the agricultural workers would not tolerate two more years under the system. In mid-July 1838, the Governor visited apprentices at various estates to explain why the farm workers needed to continue to work for two years more, but the apprentices refused to accept his arguments. The apprentices organized peaceful protests until the Governor had no other option without significantly risking a disruption in the economic structure of the country. At the request of Governor Hill, on July 25, 1838, Dr. Jean Baptiste Phillipe, the first coloured member of the Council, proposed a resolution to end apprenticeship and it was passed. On August 1, 1838, emancipation, which had theoretically been granted to the slaves in 1834, became a reality, two years before the apprenticeship program was supposed to have ended. Trinidad was the first British colony to completely end slavery.

Research Notes

Sources:

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Alex Frye, 06/05/2011

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