

The birth of Eritrean workers and its resistance movement

Written by Yishak Yared

The objective of Italian colonialists that occupy Eritrea in 1890 was to create employment opportunity for the unemployed Italians and to create new market for its products and in search of natural resources for its factories as well as creating a stepping stone for further expansion of its colonies. In order to realize these objectives, it had to develop in Eritrea communication facilities and infrastructures including roads and railways, government buildings and factories, as well as large modern agricultural facilities. It was in these endeavors that they were gradually developing different economic facilities that thousands of Eritreans were forced to work for minimal salaries that ultimately become the foundation of the working class. With the coming of the Italians modern working relationships that of the employee and employer was introduced. Farmers and pastoralists because they are self employed have no means of getting into antagonism with others. Their antagonism is with nature. With the job opportunities created by the colonialists antagonism arises between workers and employers and in a bid to ensure their social status they created workers movement. It enters into conflict with employers to ensure the workers rights and freedom. That is why workers by nature are more matured than other sectors of the society.

That trend had also to happen in Eritrea. It should be understood that the resistance of Eritrean workers had been at its infant stage. Before 1930 the economic activity of the Italian colonialist in Eritrea was very slow and as such the number of Eritrean workers was very small. The salary they were paid was also small and were mobile workers. They had to work additional job like farming and keeping animals to make their needs meet. After 1930 the economic activity in Eritrea was growing dramatically. The factories and other infrastructures were built during this time. The reason behind the fast growing economic activities by the Italian colonialists within 2-3 years was that they had the program to invade Ethiopia.

With the economic and infrastructure growing the number and quality of Eritrean workers also increased. Cities were growing and with that the number of permanent workers also increased. Parallel with that the exploitation of workers become visible vis-à-vis the variance of the salary of the indigenous compared with that of the Italians and the discrimination against the people and that resulted the growth of open resistance. The resistance movements, at the initial stage due to the fascistic nature of the Italian colonialists were not expected to create an impact, but the workers resistance movement observed in Dekemhare was one of the significant one. All in all the strong Eritrean workers movement that was observed later was initiated during the Italian colonialism.

In Eritrea the national struggle and the workers movement were of one nature. When we talk about workers movements it does not mean other sectors of the society have no part in the national struggle. However, workers by the very nature of their work and the relationship they

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had with the employers are more politically aware and eligible to take the leading role.