

Research Article

Early labor movement at the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory: Strikes, self-help associations, and worker resistance in 1940s and 1950s Ethiopia

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Abstract: *The history of workers' struggle for their right predated the formation of labor or trade unions. In this regard, cotton mill workers were in the forefront in providing a model for modern labor unions and industrial workers' strikes in the West. In Ethiopia, the history of workers' struggle can be traced back to the 1940s, when workers began work strikes organized by self-help associations, locally known as "iddir". However, its history before the 1960s was one of the least explored areas and deserves independent scholarly investigation. The objective of this study is, therefore, to reconstruct the history of the early struggle of workers of the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory, focusing on the grievances they endured in the 1950s that led to major strikes. To this end, primary sources collected from archival centers in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa were used. Besides, so as to enhance the authenticity of the findings, an attempt was also made to draw information from key informants. The findings of the study revealed that shortage of cotton prompted the establishment of self-help associations, including the Abujedid Association, in the early 1940s. The cotton factory also became a site of political resistance as the Ethiopian Imperial Government used it to counter the British Military Administration. From its inception, workers of the factory struggled against the British attempt to dismantle the factory and the subsequent foreign involvement in its management. For instance, they staged a strike against the unfair administration imposed by the management of Germans. This early strike led to the creation of a secret organizing committee which laid the foundation for the later workers' labor union. The 1956 strike, marked by the slogan: 'turn the nozzle and hit them by the butt of the gun,' turned violent and resulted in the suffering and dismissal of several leaders of the self-help association. Nevertheless, it succeeded in compelling the factory administration to address the workers' demands, making a milestone in the history of Ethiopian labor movement.*

Keywords: *Self-help associations, strike, labor union, abujedid, nozzle, butt*

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1. Introduction

Labor history in Europe can be traced to the rise of wage labor in medieval towns, especially in textile production.² Textile workers were early pioneers of industrial labor movements,

² Lucassen, "History of Work and Labour," *Journal of History and Work* Vol.11, No.2 (2014), 65, 67,68, 76

organizing some of the earliest workers' strikes in the nineteenth century³ and becoming central figures in labor historiography.⁴

Across Africa, the early twentieth century witnessed the gradual emergence of manufacturing industries and a modern working class.⁵ The 1940s and 1950s were especially significant, as growing collective protests against exploitation laid the groundwork for the formation of organized labor unions.⁶

In Ethiopia, industrial factories and a modern workforce developed after 1941. During the Italian occupation, small-scale industries such as cement production, food processing, and textiles were introduced.⁷ The first major textile factory was the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory (DDCF), established in 1939 as *Manifatture Cotoniere D'Ethiopia*. After 1941 it became the Cotton or Abujedid Factory of Dire Dawa (CFDD), later renamed the Dire Dawa Textile Mill under the military regime, and since 1991 has been known as the Dire Dawa Textile Factory.⁷

Although many studies have traced the origins of organized labor in Ethiopia to the establishment of the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) in 1963, labor activism began much earlier. Already in the 1940s, workers relied on workplace-based self-help associations (*iddir, mahber*) to articulate grievances, coordinate collective action, and negotiate with management.⁸

This study examines the early development of the Ethiopian working class through the case of the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory during the 1940s and 1950s. The factory functioned not only as an industrial establishment but also as a political-economic arena where workers, local

³ Giorgio Riello, "Cotton and the Great Divergence" *The East African Review(Online)* (2016);

⁴ Prasannan Parthasarathi, "Textile Industry" in Karin H and Linden(2018), DOI: 10.1515/9783110424584-013

⁵ Trywell Kalusopa, Kwabena Nyarko Otto(eds), and Hilma Shindondola-Mote, *Trade Union Services and Benefits in Africa, The African Labor Network Research*(2012),p.17 available at: https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/BENEFITS_REPORT_FINAL_DRAFT.pdf Ana Paula F. Mendes, Mario A. Bertella and Rudolph F.A.P. Teixeira, "Industrialization in Sub-Saharan Africa and Import Substitution Policy," *Brazilian Journal of Political Economy*, 34(1), (2014), p.121

⁶ Ruya Gokhan Kocer and Susan Hayter, "Studies of Labor relations in Africa" p.14, in *African Trade Unions and the Future of Work* ; Peter Limb, "Trade Unionism and Nationalism," p. 1755 in Kevin Shillington(ed), *Encyclopedia of African History*(London: New York: Fitzroy Dearborn/Routledge, 2005, Vol, https://history.msu.edu/wp-content/files_flutter

⁷ Sabeen Utility Corporation Limited: Wolde Meskel Tariku Archive; Folder No. 2137. 'Memorandum of Association'; The 60th Anniversary Magazine of Dir Dawa Textile Factory Labor Union, pp.37-39.

⁸The Voice, CELU publication 1970.; Abrham Makonnen, "History of formation of CELU" a paper presented at IES 1968 EC;Thomas Killion 1985: pp.390,505, Adane Kassie 2018: pp.70-94, 144, 161, 172

communities, and state actors struggled over control of Italian-built assets and resisted foreign intervention. By situating the Dire Dawa case within broader sub-Saharan African patterns of nationalization, decolonization, and labor mobilization, the study highlights the factory's significance in the longer trajectory of Ethiopian labor history.⁹

2. Research questions

This research was guided by the following research questions:

1. What were the main grievances and challenges experienced by workers at the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory during the 1940s and 1950s?
2. How did self-help associations such as the Abujedid Association contribute to worker organization and mobilization?
3. In what ways did foreign management—particularly British and German—shape working conditions and workers' responses?
4. What was the significance of the 1956 workers' strike in transforming labor relations and labor organization in Ethiopia?

3. Literature review

The historiography of Ethiopian industrialization and labor remains limited, particularly concerning early factory workers and their struggles. Although several scholars have examined the political economy of the Italian occupation and the subsequent British presence, few have analyzed the early post-occupation period from the standpoint of labor relations. The period between 1941 and 1946 is especially understudied. After Ethiopia's liberation and the restoration of Haile Selassie, the state sought to reclaim industrial assets built under Italian rule. The struggle over "enemy property" was central to early industrial policy, as Ethiopia resisted British attempts to control key industries. While Pankhurst, Haile-Muluken (2019), and Coleman Jr. (2010) address Italian and British economic legacies, they rarely examine the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory in detail. Getahun Mesfin highlights local resistance¹⁰, and Killion shows how Ethiopian

⁹ Ali Somel, "Nationalization," p.1088,69 in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism vol I*, editors Immanuel Ness, Zak Cope, and Saer Matty(Palgrave: MacMillan Publishers Ltd, 2016)

¹⁰ Getahun Mesfin Haile, "Ye-Englize Gize or British paramountcy in Dire Dawa(Ethiopia) 1941-1946", *Journal of North East African Studies*, Vol.9, No.20 (New-Series:2002), p.51

authorities limited British ambitions through plant seizures and protests.¹¹ However, the specific role of the DDCF remains marginal in much of the scholarship.

Adane characterizes 1941–1951 as a decade of “restoration and reconstruction,” often portraying industries as British-controlled or looted, which downplays Ethiopian agency.¹² Such accounts sometimes misrepresent the acquisition of Italian assets, casting figures like Makonnen Wolde-Yohannes as elite profiteers while overlooking state efforts to assert sovereignty.¹³ These narratives also minimize the significance of early factory labor struggles.

Most labor histories of Ethiopia emphasize the 1960s as the formative period, focusing on CETU and the rise of nationwide labor organization. This narrow temporal lens marginalizes earlier forms of collective action in the 1940s and 1950s, including informal workplace associations and localized resistance. Thomas Killion describes the DDCF as “a microcosm of Ethiopian industrial relations,”¹⁴ yet most studies mention it only in passing, often through figures such as Ato Zeleqe W. Mariyam, a key association leader and later CETU vice-president. Even detailed analyses, such as those by Andreas Admassie, overlook crucial events like the 1956 strike.¹⁵

Adane links the origins of Ethiopia’s working class to wage labor under colonial influence, but the role of Dire Dawa remains underexplored due to scarce sources.¹⁶ Bahru Zewde notes the 1950s labor agitation at Wonji-Showa, yet offers little discussion of early industrial factory labor.¹⁷

More broadly, African labor historiography, including works by Britwum, demonstrates that colonial-era resistance often spanned multiple sectors.¹⁸ Ethiopian studies, however, tend to isolate industrial workers from wider anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles. While textile

¹¹ Killion 1985: 256

¹² Adane Kassie 2018: p. 56

¹³ Bahru Zewde 2001: p. 198

¹⁴ Killion, pp. 267, 398, 400, 410, 424-427, 505

¹⁵ Andreas S. Admassie, ‘Dynamics of Assertive Labour Movementism in Ethiopia: Organized Labour, Unrest and Wages in a Socio-Historical Perspective,’ (Ph. Dissertation: Basel 2019), pp. 186-187

¹⁶ Adane Kassie 2018: p. 56

¹⁷ Bahru Zewde 2001: p.1 98

¹⁸ Akua O. Britwum, “Labour in African History: Trends and Organizational Forms,” paper presented at the ITUC-Africa New Year School in Kisumu(January 2012), p. 10

histories occasionally reference the DDCF, no comprehensive study situates it at the intersection of national sovereignty, industrial policy, and early state–labor relations.

The conceptual framework of labor movements further supports the need to revisit early Ethiopian labor history. The rise of the capitalist mode of production introduced factory-based labor systems that concentrated workers in urban industrial centers, fostering shared experiences, collective identity, and class consciousness. Across Africa, labor movements became platforms not only for workplace reform but also for broader political and nationalist mobilization in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁹

A labor movement, broadly defined, encompasses all collective efforts—unions, strikes, protests, workplace committees aimed at improving workers’ economic, social, and political conditions.²⁰ Existing literature often places the emergence of Ethiopian labor consciousness in the late 1950s and 1960s, a view shaped largely by Marxist-oriented interpretations of African labor unionism. As Bellucci and Eckert note, although Marxist analyses portrayed trade unions as the vanguard of the African working class, unions represented only a small fraction of the workforce.²¹

Evidence suggests earlier origins of labor activism in Ethiopia: the 1920s and early 1930s saw a growing urban waged population, and during the Italian occupation and immediate post-liberation period, collective action took more defined forms. By the 1940s and 1950s, workplace-based labor movements were expanding and later culminated in national labor organization in the 1960s. The Dire Dawa Textile Factory (DDTF) stands out as a particularly illuminating case through which to trace this long trajectory of worker organization, strike activity, and class formation. Its history fills a significant gap in the literature and highlights the deeper roots of Ethiopia’s labor movement.

¹⁹ Trywell Kalusopa, Kwabena Nyarko Otto (eds), and Hilma Shindondola-Mote, *Trade Union Services and Benefits in Africa, The African Labor Network Research* (2012), p.17 available at: https://www.ituc-africa.org/IMG/pdf/BENEFITS_REPORT_FINAL_DRAFT.pdf

²⁰ Vaia, ‘Labour Movement: Definition, Reform and Causes’ on line available at- <https://www.vaia.com/en-us/explanations/microeconomics/labour-market/labour-movement/> Accessed, 14/12/2024

²¹ Stefano Bellucci and Andreas Eckert, “ the ‘Labor Questions’ in Africanist Historiography”, in *General Labor History of Africa* (2011) pp. 3-4

4. Methodology

This study draws on a range of primary sources from Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa, including government reports, meeting minutes, and oral testimonies. These materials enable a reconstruction of worker experiences, grievances, and organizational strategies at the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory during the 1940s and 1950s. The research focuses especially on the strikes and collective actions of the period, with particular emphasis on the 1956 strike due to its enduring significance in Ethiopian labor history. Both documentary evidence and the collective memories of key informants were used to capture the dynamics of workplace organization, management practices, and forms of worker resistance.

Throughout the study, the terms Dire Dawa Textile Factory, Dire Dawa Cotton Factory, Cotton Factory, and *Abujedid* Factory are used interchangeably to refer to the same establishment.

5. Findings

5.1. Liberation, the struggle over ‘enemy property’ and the assertion of sovereignty

The period of Italian occupation (1935-1941) laid the foundation for industrial development in Ethiopia. During this time several small scale industries emerged including oil mills, flour mills, food and meat processing plants, beverage factories, cement production and textile manufacturing. Among these were the Dire Dawa Cotton Mill and the Dire Dawa Cement Factory.²²

The Italians were expelled from Ethiopia in 1941. However, Ethiopia’s independence remained precarious due to the dominant position of the British, who regarded the country as part of the “Occupied Enemy Territory Administration,”²³ This was the Italian designation for their colonial holdings in east Africa, and it sought to protect the interests of the Italians residing in Ethiopia. In response, the imperial regime made every effort to safeguard the full independence of Ethiopia.²⁴

²² Henri Baldet, “Urban Study of Dire Dawa” (BA Senior Essay, submitted to the Department of Geography, AAU, 1970), pp. 21, 28

²³ Aklilu Habte Wold, *Aklilu Remembers*, (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2015), p. 29

²⁴ Richard Greenfield, *Ethiopia: A New Political History* (London: Reprint 2013, Addis Ababa), p. 205

Haile-Muluken argues that Britain's claim over Italian properties established in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa was justified by war time laws and agreements. Consequently, Italian assets in Ethiopia were considered subject to transfer to the victors.²⁵

As Coleman convincingly notes, the declaration of the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (OETA) was primarily intended to seize, dismantle, and relocate the Italian-built factories, workshops, and mills. However, Emperor Haile Selassie did not sign any treaty or agreement with Great Britain during the joint military campaign against the forces of fascist Italy in the Horn. As a result, both the British and the Imperial Ethiopian Government lacked a clear legal framework to formally claim or counter claim ownership of Italian properties in Ethiopia. Notably, the first Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement, signed in 1942, makes no reference to British possession of enemy property.²⁶

Though the emperor lacked appropriate framework to deal with the British act of dismantling Italian properties, Ethiopians actively resisted British attempts to take over Italian assets. As a result, there was significant confrontation over the retention of fascist Italian properties from being taken over by the British military administration. Even after the 1942 agreement, Ethiopian military officials and patriots continued to resist British actions in this regard. A notable example is an exchange of fire between Ethiopian patriots and Commonwealth forces over a sisal factory.²⁷

The case with Dire Dawa Textile Factory was another point of contention between the British and the Imperial Ethiopian Government. British troops entered Dire Dawa on March 29, 1941, and quickly established control over the city and its Italian owned properties. According to local informants, the British presence in Dire Dawa is still remembered as "*Ye-Engliz Gize*," (literally, "the time of the British"). Had it not been for the intervention of the governor of Dire Dawa during the immediate post-liberation period, Kibret Astatke, supported by the local community, the British might have dismantled the Dire Dawa Textile Factory.²⁸

²⁵ Haile Muluken, "The British and Ethiopian Disposal of Italian Property in Ethiopia, 1941-1956: A Historical Review of the Theory and Practices of the Custodian ship of Enemy Property"-*Journal of Canadian Social Science*, (2019), p. 2

²⁶ Coleman, "No Independence Without Sovereignty," *Aethopica* (2010): 58,59

²⁷ Haile (2019), p.11, Zewde (2012), pp. 416-250, Coleman(2010), p. 59

²⁸ Getahun Mesfin (2002), pp. 63,64.

5.2 The Cotton Company of Ethiopia: from enemy property to national asset

The turning point in the factory's fate came with the 1942 Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement, which ended the OETA. Beyond defending Ethiopia's independence, the Imperial Government also resisted British attempts to seize and exploit Italian properties, ultimately working to transfer them into state ownership. Following the January 1942 agreement, the Ethiopian government and British authorities established the Custodian of Enemy Property which was responsible for registering, administering, safeguarding, and eventually selling Italian properties through public auction to interested individuals residing in Ethiopia. A foreigner named David Hall was appointed to head the office.²⁹

On March 14, 1942 (*Megabit* 7/1934 E.C.), the Ministry of Trade and Industry sent Italian experts Vilitti Nino Girola and Miralo Angelo to inspect and resume operations at the *Abujedid* Factory. By April 6, 1942 (*Megabit* 28/1934 E.C.), a decision had been created to restart the factory.³⁰ Initially under British claim, the property was later transferred to the Custodian of Enemy Property, who handed it over to the governor of Dire Dawa on April 28, 1942.³¹ Thus, as noted by Greenfield, the “difference over the Italian property were to a large extent resolved by compromise.”³²

A letter dated September 21, 1942, reflects the improving relations between British officers and the Ethiopian Imperial Government regarding former Italian properties. It notes that the vice governor recognized the “greatly improved” relations and, despite previously using firm language, requested the resumption of official correspondence:

*.... In view of the circumstances the vice government regrets very much the necessity that compelled him to employ the languages he understands to be hard and at the same time asks for the resumption of correspondence.*³³

²⁹ Haile- (2019),p.2,; From Hall to Minister of the Ministry of Interior: Wolde-Meskel Tariku Archive File No.2137 v27.

³⁰ From Alemu Mersha (for Mesay Andargachew) to Enderassie of Prince Makonnen: NALA: Folder No: 21/58: File No:17.1.7.31.06, Hararghe *Teklai-Gizat*, About *Abujedid* Factory; April 6/1942.

³¹ From Hall to Minister of the Ministry of Interior: Wolde-Meskel Tariku Archive File No.2137 v27

³² Greenfield, , 205

³³ From Andargachew Messai to *Tsehafe-Tizaz* Wolde-Giyorgis Wolde- Yohannis, NALA:File.17,1.7.31.06. This letter was written in English language

Meanwhile, Emperor Haile Selassie I reorganized the Sabean Utility Corporation (SUC) with Anglo-Egyptian backing to manage former Italian industrial plants, including the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory. As the first post-liberation share company, SUC leased the Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa textile factories from the Custodian of Enemy Property in 1942, marking the official founding of the cotton factory that year.³⁴

British officials initiated the transfer of the Cotton Factory to the Custodian of Enemy Property on January 28, 1943, with formal takeover on February 3, 1943.³⁵ Earlier correspondence among senior Ethiopian officials on September 21, 1942, reflects the gradual warming of relations between the Ethiopian government and British authorities in Ethiopia as it says:

“ከእንግሊዝ ባለሥልጣኖች ጋር ያለን የዝምድና መግናኛ እየተሻሻለ በመሄዱ ሥላ ኦቡጀዲድ ፋብሪካ የተጻጻፍናቸውን ደብዳቤዎቻችን ወስደናቸዋል።”³⁶ Literally translated, the text reads: “As our friendly relationship with British Officials continued to improve, we took up the letters of correspondence we had written regarding the *Abujedid* Factory.”

Beyond its economic role, the cotton factory symbolized growing cooperation between the Ethiopian Imperial Government and British official.

To reinforce Ethiopia’s ownership of the Abujedid Factory, a memorandum of understanding was signed on December 22, 1943, establishing the Dire Dawa Cotton Mill Factory as a share company.³⁷

The imperial government issued the 1944 factory proclamation to run the nationalized and reprivatized industrial plants, with Article III creating a ‘Board of Management,’ laying the foundation for industrial relations in Ethiopia.³⁸

³⁴ Killion, pp.264-267.; Sabean Utility Corporation:174th Board Meeting, Notes Submitted by the Management to the Board of Directors Regarding Points Raised at the General Meeting November 1969’ (February 1970), NALA:F/Archive No:21/58;File No.1.2.49.09.

³⁵ From Abebe Gebre to *Dejazmatch* Tassew Wallelu, Wolde-Meskel Tariku Archive File: 2137 v28:dated Tir 26, 1935EC or February 3,1943.

³⁶ From Andargachew Messai to *Tsehafe-Tizaz* Wolde-Giyorgis Wolde-Yohannis, NALA:File.17,1.7.31.06.

³⁷ Sabean Utility Corporation Limited: Wolde Meskel Tariku Archive; Folder No. 2137. ‘Memorandum of Association’

³⁸ Seyum Gebreigziabher, “ The Development of Some Institutions Concerned with Labour Relations in Ethiopia,” (A Teaching Material , Haile-Sellasié I University, Department of Public Administration, 1969), p.12

Earlier, on May 1, 1943, the Custodian of Enemy Property had leased the factory to the Sabean Utility Corporation (SUC) for the first time. In mid-1945, agreements were concluded between the Custodian office and SUC to fully incorporate the *Abujedid* Mill.³⁹ Finally, in December 1945, the Cotton Company purchased the entire factory from the Custodian of Enemy Property.⁴⁰ A letter dated April 10, 1946, provides insight into the Company's ownership, stating: "Since this company is owned by shareholders under the law of the Imperial Government of Ethiopia..." Its headquarters were located in Addis Ababa and its president was Ethiopian. The meetings of the board of directors also held in Addis Ababa, further confirmed that the company was owned by the Ethiopian Imperial Government.⁴¹

By 1946, the legal status and ownership of the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory (DDCF) were resolved, marking a turning point for Ethiopia's sovereignty and labor history. On July 1, 1946, the British formally handed over Dire Dawa and the CFE to Ethiopian authorities, while the French took control of their holdings.⁴² Historical accounts often downplay this struggle, portraying it as a personal issue of the emperor, but Wagaw Bekele highlights his strategic efforts to nationalize industrial assets and safeguard sovereignty.⁴³ As Britwum notes, colonial African protests were "comprehensive and cross-sectoral," uniting workers across sectors.⁴⁴ The DDCF, thus, symbolizes successful local resistance, national sovereignty, and the emergence of organized labor in Ethiopia's modern economy. .

5.3. The post-liberation textile crisis and self-help associations in the 1940s

Historically, Ethiopia met its clothing needs through home-woven textiles and imported fabrics. Among these, cotton cloth—commonly known as *abujedid* (unbleached cotton sheeting)—became especially popular. Regarding its significance in Ethiopia's global trade and the public's attitude

³⁹ Sales Agreement between the Valuation Committee and Sabean Utility (Wolde-Meskel Tariku -Folder No:2137/36)

⁴⁰ From Yilma to *Tsehafe-Tizaz* Wolde-Giyorgis: IES.WMTA: Folder No.2137/37

⁴¹ From Sabean Utility to *Ato* Abebe Gebre, chief director of *Rist* department, dated April 10/1946 Wolde Meskel Tariku Archive Folder No. 2137, number 65.

⁴² Kilion, 599; Cedric Barness, "The Somali Youth League, Ethiopian Somalis and the Greater Somalia Idea," *Journal of East African Studies*, Vol 1, No.2 (July 2007), 277-291

⁴³ Wagaw Bekele, "A History of Bete-Rest(Private Domain) Office of Emperor Haile-sellasie I: A Study in Royal Property Management, 1941-1975" (Ph D. Dissertation: AAU, Department of History), June 2016).

⁴⁴ Britwum 2012: p. 10

toward it, Bahru notes that “*abujedid was not only the principal import item but was highly valued in Ethiopia...*”⁴⁵

After liberation, clothing shortages worsened due to the Italian occupation’s disruption of domestic production and imports, creating an acute crisis captured by the saying: ““ደሃው የሚለብሰው አጥቶ ጆንያ ለብሶ ይሄዳል”–“The poor, unable to find clothes, walk around in sacks.”⁴⁶

To address the clothing crisis, the Imperial Ethiopian Government introduced several initiatives including the establishment of *Ras-Agez Mahberoch* (Self-Help Associations) across the country, particularly in provincial and sub-provincial towns. These associations aimed to mobilize local communities for the production and equitable distribution of clothing. Another state measure was the importation and distribution of *abujedid* through the Ethiopian National Company, popularly known as *Mahber-Bet*.⁴⁷

A similar clothing shortage was experienced in Chercher *Awrajja*, within the Governorate General of Hararge. To address this problem, the Imperial Government encouraged the formation of community-based *Ras-Agez Mahberoch*. A letter dated December 17, 1944 provides direct evidence for the establishment of this association. It states:

“በአቡጃዲድ ምክኒያት ህዝቡ ስለተቸገረ የከተማው ህዝብ፤ በመግባት ማሪያ ቤት ያሉት ሰራተኞች ሁሉ ተሰብስበው የጨፈፈ ያንድነት እና የመተባበር ማህበር የአቡጃዲድ ማህበር አቋቋሙ፡” Literally translated this passage reads: “Due to the shortage of *abujedid*, the people faced great hardship. Therefore, the townspeople, including all government employees of Chercher *Awrajja*, gathered and established an *abujedid* self-help association known as the Chercher Association of Unity and Cooperation.”⁴⁸

From the wording above, two points stand out clearly regarding the establishment of self-help associations. First, it highlights the involvement of the Ethiopian Imperial Government, which took the primary initiative to establish such associations during times of hardship, aiming to

⁴⁵ Bahru 2001: p. 97

⁴⁶ “Extract from letter no.287 of *Gazetta* and *Mastawokiya* Office” NALA Folder:34; File No:17/2/37/08

⁴⁷ John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Addis Ababa, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 368.; Killion 1985: p. 266, 267

⁴⁸ NALA: Folder No.34, File 17.2.37.08; folder 34, file. 17.2.37.07

mitigate community problems. Second, it emphasizes that these associations need to be established in a manner that engage the broader social fabric if they are to effectively address social and economic hardships through cooperation.

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture also formed a Cotton Association to stimulate raw cotton production and support local textile manufacturing. By 1947, this association in Addis Ababa alone employed approximately 4,000 female spinners and 300 male weavers, demonstrating the scale of governmental efforts to revive domestic textile production.⁴⁹

5.4. Early strike of Ethiopian workers and the origin of workers' self-help association

Ethiopians valued cotton mills not only for their economic role but as symbols of post-liberation aspirations and resistance to external domination. As M. Perham noted, “The cotton mill was a factory of great interest to Ethiopians.”⁵⁰

DDTF as the first industrial factory provides an important opportunity to study the labor movement in the early 1940s. Wages, strikes, trade unions, and collective bargaining are closely linked: wage disputes often trigger strikes, which encourage union formation and the development of collective bargaining.⁵¹ Globally, textile workers were among the first to strike, making factories key sites of social conflict and working-class formation.⁵² As Jeremy Brecher (1978: 20) notes, understanding factories requires examining the relationships between managers and workers, and how technology, bureaucracy, and ideology shape labor relations.⁵³

In Ethiopia, the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory—owned by Ethiopian, British, and Egyptian investors—emerged as an early site of such conflicts, with management rotating among British, German, and Japanese teams from the 1940s to the 1960s.⁵⁴ In Dire Dawa, factory workers

⁴⁹ Killion, pp. 267-269, 273

⁵⁰ Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p.184.

⁵¹ Tilahun Teshome, ‘An Overview of the Right to Strike in Ethiopia’, *Journal of Ethiopian Law*, Vol.16(1993), p. 216, 217. Available at: https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA00220914_126

⁵² Dest Abebe 2018: 110-111; Tilahun Teshome 1993: p.216, 217; Giorgio Riello 2016)

⁵³ Görkem Akgöz, Richard Croucher & Nicola Pizzolato “Back to the factory: the continuing salience of industrial workplace history,” *Labor History*(2020), 61:1, 1-11, DOI: 10.1080/0023656X.2019.1681632

⁵⁴ Sabeen Utility Corporation:174th Board Meeting, Notes Submitted by the Management to the Board of Directors Regarding Points Raised at the General Meeting November 1969’ (February 1970), NALA:F/Archive No:21/58;File No.1.2.49.09; ‘Internal Regulation for the Founding of the Ethiopian abujudid Company Ltd’, 1946, (Addis Ababa: Birhanina-selam printing Press, 12/8/1938 EC)

began organizing in the 1940s and 1950s to demand higher pay, better conditions, and political recognition, marking the beginning of industrial labor activism in Ethiopia. Although records are limited, evidence shows unrest, strikes, and negotiations with management.

Early strikes at the factory reflected both local grievances and broader geopolitical tensions, with precedents rooted in early interactions between British officials and the Imperial Ethiopian Government. During the period of Italian occupation, the colonial management at the factory paid extremely low wages and employed various methods to motivate workers, practices the workers mockingly referred to as the “*Bane* (bread) and Biscuit” system.⁵⁵

After 1941, this approach persisted under the British management, which also paid very low wage. The only notable change was made in the form of worker “motivation”: the British replaced the *bane* and biscuit with candies. This practice was particularly introduced by Zondel, the managing director appointed by the British. An informant, in fact, a worker employed in the factory, imparts her reminiscence when she says;

“ዘንዴል የሚባል እንግሊዝኛ ደሞዝ ቀጥሮ እያሰራን በሚላብሰው ሳሪያን ኮት ውስጥ ብዙ ከረሜል ይዞ ያድላን ነበር፡፡” Literally translated, the passage reads: “An English national named Zondel employed us and we were working with very low wages. He kept many candies in his pocket which he doles out for us.”⁵⁶

The early workers’ strike was rooted primarily in the meager wages—between 0.50 and 0.70 Ethiopian cents—paid to factory employees. Its immediate trigger was the workers’ refusal to accept candies and chocolates offered by the managing director, a gesture they interpreted as a manipulative attempt to distract them from their extremely low pay. For Ethiopian workers, this tactic recalled the Fascist Italian practice of offering *bane* and biscuits to appease laborers while maintaining exploitative wage structures.⁵⁷

The workers’ boycott was not spontaneous; it was a coordinated act of resistance organized through a series of secret meetings. A clandestine committee emerged to challenge the British

⁵⁵ Informants: *Ato* Asfaw Asmare, Gorfu Beyen and Asfaw Tesema, *Wizero* Mariya Gosa, *Woizero* Ilfsew Asmare. Interviewed in the Special Magazine of the 60th Anniversary of the factory.p. 37, 38 42.

⁵⁶ Informant: *Woizeo* Mariya Gosa interviewed in the “Special magazine for Sixtieth Anniversary of the factory.”(Dire Dawa: 1991 E.C.), p. 40.

⁵⁷ The 25th Jubilee, p. 5; 60th anniversary.

manager's "cajoling system" and to develop strategies for collective discipline. The committee instructed workers to reject the gifts, remain vigilant, and avoid interactions that could undermine their solidarity. These covert meetings not only strengthened unity but also laid the foundations for early self-help associations that later became central to Ethiopia's broader labour movement.⁵⁸

Management reacted sharply to this defiance. A significant number of workers involved in the strike were dismissed, and new employees were recruited from the local population to fill the vacancies. In line with the broader British colonial strategy of "divide and rule," the management attempted to weaken worker solidarity by selectively promoting certain individuals and granting them special privileges—a tactic Marxists describe as creating a "labor aristocracy." Those who continued to resist faced sustained pressure to withdraw or resign. The 1944 resignation of Maria Gosa, one of the key informants, exemplifies the coercive environment Ethiopian workers confronted during this period.⁵⁹

Another precedent that gave CFDD workers experience in organizing strikes came from the Franco-Ethiopian Railway Company (CFE) and other workers in Dire Dawa. Railway workers had staged a partly successful 1942 strike for higher pay under the BMA and later formed Ethiopia's first labor association, the *Syndicate des Cheminots Ethiopiens*, in July 1946. Their three-month strike that year, supported by Dire Dawa residents, helped inspire CFDD employees, who launched their own short strike in 1947 against low wages and mistreatment—the earliest recorded strike in an Ethiopian textile factory.⁶⁰

Railway workers struck again in 1949 over poor conditions, drawing solidarity from cement and textile workers and unemployed townspeople.⁶¹ CFDD workers' participation in this stoppage fits the ILO definition of a sympathy strike⁶² and marked a key moment in the growth of shared class consciousness among Ethiopia's emerging industrial workforce.

⁵⁸ The 25th Jubilee, p. 5; 60th anniversary.

⁵⁹ "Magazine of The 25th Jubilee of CFDD labor union, p.5; *Woizero* Mariya in '60th anniversary'

⁶⁰ Killion 1985: pp. 260, 398, 410, 410, 424-427

⁶¹ Killion 1985: pp. 260, 398, 400, 410, 424-427

⁶² Pohl, 'Strike Activities through Business Cycle and Political Exchange Model' 2018

5.5. The German Management, unfair labor practice, and workers of CFDD

Labor relations in Ethiopian factories in the 1940s were formally guided by the 1944 Factory Proclamation, but the law omitted key issues such as wages, grievance procedures, and collective bargaining, giving managers broad discretionary power.⁶³ In this gap, petitions and correspondence among workers, managers, and state officials became vital evidence of everyday labor relations. As Akgoz and others note, such petitions reveal aspects of workers' lived experience that formal administrative records often overlook.⁶⁴

In contexts with weak or absent trade unions—such as Ethiopia—the state often became the main regulator of industrial relations.⁶⁵ Confidential government reports from the early 1950s reveal tensions, managerial abuses, and worker grievances at the DDCF under German supervision. After management shifted to a German technical team in the late 1940s under an Anglo-Ethiopian partnership, conflicts between Ethiopian workers and German managers intensified between 1950 and 1956.

Unfair Labour Practices (ULP) was a central source of unrest. High levels of ULP typically signal structurally unequal labor relations and increase the likelihood of strikes,⁶⁶ making ULP a useful lens for assessing the harmful effects of German management at DDCF.

Clandestine documents from 1950 and 1951 revealed internal subversive actions by the German management. A 1950 document attributes all the factory's problems to the Germans stating: “ፋብሪካውን እያቆሙ ሥራ እያስፈቱ ችግር ላይ እንዲዎድቅ የሚያደርጉ እነሱ ናቸው።”⁶⁷ Literally translated, this reads: “It is they [the Germans] who caused the factory's bankruptcy by creating problems such as stopping work and engaging in idle activities.” Similarly, a 1951 document revealed partial evidence of internal subversive activities carried out by the German management, highlighting their disruptive practices: “እቡጃዲድ ፋብሪካን የሚያስተዳድሩት ጀርመኖች

⁶³ Seyoum Gebre-Igziabher 1969: p. 12
⁶⁴ Gorkem Akgoz, "Petitioning as Industrial Bargaining in a Turkish State Factory: The Changing Nature of Petitioning in Early Republican Turkey," 2018
⁶⁵ Harry C. Katz, Sarosh Kuruvilla, and Lowell Turner, "Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining," *World bank Working Paper* 1099(1993). p. 5
⁶⁶ Bruce Kaufman, 'The Determinants of Strikes over Time and Across Industries' pp. 161-166
⁶⁷ NALA Folder No.17.02.304.03; September,1950 GC; from Hararghe *Teklai-gizat* chief Police Officer to Colonel Abebe Degefu, Vice general Officer of Police force-የፖሊስ ሰራዊት ም/ጠቅላይ አዛዥ

አድራጎች ... የወስጥ ተንኮላቸው...:”⁶⁸ Literally translated, the text reads: “The activities of the Germans who administered the *Abujedid* Factory... their subversive activities...” It is regrettable, however, that this later document fails to disclose the specific nature or details of the subversive acts attributed to the management.

One of the internal subversive acts carried out by the Germans involved actions that worked to the disadvantage of Ethiopians. In Amharic, the document states: “አቡጃዲድ ፋብሪካን የመዋሰንተኛዎች ጀርመኖች ከጣሊያኖች ጋር በመዋደርጉት ግንኙነት ኢትዮጵያኖች እንዲጠሉ ያደርጋሉ:” Literally translated, this reads: “The Germans who managed the *Abujedid* Factory established relations with the Italians that fostered hostility towards Ethiopians.” In addition, the Germans promoted newly hired workers to the positions of authority while dismissing experienced Ethiopian employees. As the document notes: “አንዱን ሹም ነባሩን ያዎጠፍ አዲሱን ያደርጋሉ:” A literal translation reads: “They dismissed the experienced leader and appointed a newly employed foreigner in his place”⁶⁹

The Germans were also accused of defying and denying the right of Ethiopian unit heads to assign delegates during their annual leave. The document states: “ግን ዛሬ እሱ እኔ የፈለግሁትን አደርጋለሁ እንጂ እናንተ ወኪል አደርጋችሁልኝ ማይ አትችሉም ይለል:” Literally translated, this reads: “He [the German] says, ‘you cannot delegate and go, for I can appoint whomever I wish as my delegate.’”⁷⁰

Further details in the document indicate that the Germans pursued this course of action in order to demote Ethiopian leaders to lower positions upon their return from annual leave.⁷¹ The document interpreted these practices as part of a hidden conspiracy by the Germans against Ethiopians who held leadership roles.

⁶⁸ From Chief Director of Public Security Protection Office to *Blatta Ayele Gebre-Enderassie* of Hararghe *Teklai-gizat*. Date: Tir 3/1943 EC NALA: 06047

⁶⁹ From Chief Director of Public Security Protection Office to *Blatta Ayele Gebre-Enderassie* of Hararghe *Teklai-gizat*. Date: Tir 3/1943 EC NALA: 06047

⁷⁰ NALA Folder No.17.02.304.03; September,1950 GC; from Hararghe *Teklai-gizat* chief Police Officer to Colonel Abebe Degefu, Vice general Officer of Police force-የፖሊስ ሰራዊት ም/ጠቅላይ አዛዥ

⁷¹ NALA Folder No.17.02.304.03; September,1950 GC; from Hararghe *Teklai-gizat* chief Police Officer to Colonel Abebe Degefu, Vice general Officer of Police force-የፖሊስ ሰራዊት ም/ጠቅላይ አዛዥ

It was, and still is, a common practice for several workers in a factory to share an office. However, the Germans prevented Ethiopian workers from entering office even for trivial reasons, such as the loss of minor stationery items like pens and pencils, accusations made without any supportive evidence. Such arrogance and unjust actions severely disrupted the smooth functioning of the factory, as the Germans went so far as to lock offices where essential items, such as keys to mills, were kept.⁷²

A particular German was even accused of dismissing an Ethiopian unit leader, Lemma Alemu, without any valid reason, simply to appoint a German who was a relative of his close friend. The complaint letter states: “አንድ ወገኑን ለማስወገድ ሲል ለሚሰጠው የክፍል አሰሪ ያላንዳች ጥፋት አስዎጥቶ ያንኑ ያመጣውን አዲሱን ሰው አስገብቶ ብዙ የደከመኛ የሰሩ እያሉ የክፍል ኃላፊ አድርጎ በመኛ መኛ በማስወገድ ብዙ ብስጭት ተፈጥሯል፡፡” Literally translated, this reads: “Another issue that caused great anger was that, in order to benefit his own relative, he dismissed the Ethiopian unit leader, Lemma Alemu, who had served for many years without any wrongdoing, and appointed a completely inexperienced person to the position of unit leader.” In modern terms, this was a clear act of nepotism.⁷³

Another instance of prejudice created by the German managing team concerned medical services for workers and the annual bonus system. Contrary to the factory’s established regulations, the German manager permitted foreign workers with less than six months of experience to reside in rooms located within the factory clinic compound. Furthermore, in violation of the internal rule prohibiting annual bonuses for workers with more than thirty days of absenteeism, the German granted such a bonus to an Italian co-worker who had been in Kenya for three months “አንድ ኢጣሊያዊ ወደ ናይሮቢ ከሄደ ወደ ሦሥት ወር ሳይሰራ በሙሉ ደመዎቱን ከፍለወታል፡፡” This decision caused great discontent among Ethiopian workers, who were denied similar privileges even when they presented official medical certificates for their absence.⁷⁴

⁷² NALA Folder No.17.02.304.03; September,1950 GC; from Hararghe *Teklai-gizat* chief Police Officer to Colonel Abebe Degefu, Vice general Officer of Police force-የፖሊስ ሰራዊት ም/ጠቅላይ አዛዥ

⁷³ NALA Folder No.17.02.304.03; September,1950 GC; from Hararghe *Teklai-gizat* chief Police Officer to Colonel Abebe Degefu, Vice general Officer of Police force-የፖሊስ ሰራዊት ም/ጠቅላይ አዛዥ

⁷⁴ NALA Folder No.17.02.304.03; September,1950 GC; from Hararghe *Teklai-gizat* chief Police Officer to Colonel Abebe Degefu, Vice general Officer of Police force-የፖሊስ ሰራዊት ም/ጠቅላይ አዛዥ

The document further states: “በህመም ምክንያት ለሙቅሩበት ቀን ለምን አይከፍለንም በማለት ላይ ሳሉ... በዚህም ምክንያት ከፍ ያለ ሀዘን ህዝቡን ተሰምቶታል፡፡” Literally translated, this reads: “While they were asking, ‘why we are not paid for the days we miss due to illness?’ [The German paid full salary to an Italian co-worker who was absent for three months] ... Because of this, the public was deeply distressed.”⁷⁵

The following document further elaborates on the sabotage allegedly carried out by the Germans in collaboration with the Italians: “ይኸው አስተዳዳሪው ጀርመን የጣሊያኖች ደጋፊና አንድ ማህኑን ያስረዳል,” which literally translated as, “This support that the Germans extended to the Italians shows that they are one and the same.” As can be inferred from additional details in the document, the preferential treatment shown by the German management toward the Italian workers led the local employees to consider organizing strikes.⁷⁶

Although it is difficult to generalize about the authenticity of all the accusations, it is nevertheless impossible to overlook the significance of the document in shedding light on the working conditions of Ethiopian workers in the factory. The document carries important implications for academic interpretation.

In Ethiopia, a country without a colonial past, the case of CFDD provides valuable context for understanding labor strike organized by Ethiopian workers in the 1940s and 1950s. From this period onward, factory workers began agitating for strikes, particularly after many of them lost their jobs.⁷⁷ This situation also laid the ground for subsequent labour movements in the following years. Five years later, the workers launched a large-scale strike that ultimately required intervention by the imperial government.

These tensions laid the groundwork for class consciousness at DDCF. This consciousness developed through everyday experiences of injustice, discrimination, and exclusion from

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Lieutenant Colonel-chief of Hararghe *Tekali-gizat* police Office to Colonel Abebe Degefu, v/chief of Police Office. Date: *Meskerem* 13/1943 EC. NALA

decision-making, consistent with Thompson's and Katznelson's argument that class emerges through lived struggle.⁷⁸

5.6. “Turn the nozzle and hit them by butt of the gun”: The forgotten 1956 workers' strike

As Kaufman posits, the role of time must be considered when addressing workers' strikes. The 1955 revised constitution granted workers the right of association.⁷⁹ Some commentators note that the legal recognition of workers' associations encouraged workers to assert their rights, contributing to repeated violent strikes in 1956, one of which was infamously dubbed “turn the nozzle and hit by butt of the gun.”

5.6.1 The cause, course and end of the strike

The first round of strikes, staged at the beginning of February 1956 by the workers of the cotton factory, was caused by low wages. A letter written by Tsige Dibu on February 8, 1956, highlights the cause of the strike and how it drew the attention of the government: “ደመዎዝ ኣነሰን በማለት በድሬዳዋ ኣቡጃዲድ ፋብሪካ ስራቸውን ኣቋመዋል። (At Dire Dawa, workers Abujedid Factory of stopped working claiming due insufficient wage).”⁸⁰ The strike lasted for five days, reportedly causing significant losses to the factory.⁸¹

Although the imperial government initially addressed their demands, the workers resumed striking due to additional grievances.⁸² On February 16 and March 10, 1956, the matter was communicated to the Hararge *Teklay Gizat* (Governorate General of Hararge), which subsequently reported it to the Ministry of Interior on April 20, 1956.⁸³

⁷⁸ Ira Katznelson, “Working Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons,” in Ira Katznelson, and Aristide R. Zolberg (eds), *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Pattern in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986)

⁷⁹ 25th Jubilee, 60th jubilee

⁸⁰ From Tsige Dibu, second Chief Police Force to Public Security Protection Office of the Ministry of Interior. Date: *Tir* 30/1943 EC.

⁸¹ From Cotton Company of Ethiopia, ‘Notice to All workers of Ethiopia Abujedid Factory’. Date: *Megabit* 15/1948 EC (NALA 06085)

⁸² From Cotton Company of Ethiopia, ‘Notice to All workers...’ Date: *Megabit* 15/1948 EC (NALA 06085)

⁸³ From Hararge Governorate General Office to Public Security department of the Ministry of Interior. Date: 14/8/1948 EC. NALA Folder No.17.2.304.05;06080

During its second phase, which lasted from March 21 to 27, 1956, the strike was prompted by workers' demands for the dismissal of certain employees from the factory.⁸⁴ At this stage, they sought to gain the support of other workers, emphasizing the importance of solidarity among the workforce. They selected representatives to present their demands in Addis Ababa and pledged not to resume work until their representatives returned.

In response to the workers' activities, on March 25, 1956, the factory posted a notice asking workers to resume work, assuring protection for those willing to return. The factory set a deadline and warned striking workers to comply. Adding to the tension, the company rejected the workers' demands to dismiss certain employees deemed problematic, stating:

“በማራያ ቤቱ ውሥጥ ለማስገባትና ለማስደገጥ መብት ያለው የማራያ ቤቱ ባለሥልጣን ብቻ ነው፡ ስለሁለቱ ሰራተኞች መታገድ ያቀረባችሁት ጥያቄ አግባብ የሌለውና የሰው ልጅ መብት የሚካከል ስለሆነ አለመቀበላችንን እናስታወቃለን፡፡ (Lit. “The sole responsibility of employing and dismissing workers in the factory lies with the managing director. Let it be known that we do not accept your request regarding the suspension of the two workers, as it is improper and violates their rights.”)⁸⁵

On the third day of the strike, the factory issued another notice warning workers to return on Monday, March 25, 1956. The company clarified that failure to resume work would be considered voluntary resignation. It further announced that those responsible for the disruption would be dismissed, brought before the law, and held accountable for all damages.⁸⁶

On March 24, 1956, the governor of Dire Dawa *Awraja*, *Ato Workineh Wolde-Amanuel*, expressed the same view, stating that the workers' demands for and their decision to strike on such grounds were illegal and constituted a serious disciplinary violation. His notice went beyond this statement, warning that strict measures would be taken against any worker who attempted to attack those willing to return to work. He further emphasized that any effort to

⁸⁴ From Cotton Company of Ethiopia ‘Notice to All workers of Ethiopia *Abujedid* Factory’. Date: Megabit 15/1948 E.C.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

prevent voluntary workers from resuming their duties, or to provoke conflict and disrupt public order, would be dealt with by security forces.⁸⁷

The notices and warnings issued by both the factory and the governor, along with the guarantee of protection for those willing to return to work, appeared to have produced mixed results. Some workers complied with the deadline and resumed their duties, while others refused to do so. This situation heightened tensions and led to a confrontation involving the striking workers and the police. The main group of strikers rejected both the notices and warnings against any forceful actions. Subsequently, about three hundred of them went in person to the *Awrajja* office to present their grievances. In response, the governor reiterated that the government would provide protection for workers willing to resume work. Regarding their demands, however, he stated that the workers' request was inappropriate, explaining:

“በያደባባዩ የተለጠፈው ማስታዎቂያ ሥራቸውን ለማሰሩ ፈቃደኞች ሁከት እንዳይደርስባቸው የወጣ በመሆኑ ይኸን ጥያቄ ማጠየቅ ባልተገባችሁ ነበር፡፡ (Since the notice posted in every public square was intended to ensure for the safety of those willing to resume work from any form of attack, you should not have raised this issue).”⁸⁸

The striking workers, for their part, firmly informed the *Awrajja* governor that they were determined to continue their strike until their demands received an appropriate response. As they raised multiple issues, and created disorder, they were instructed to present their demands in written form. Accordingly, they selected seven elders to submit their written petitions.⁸⁹

At this stage, it would have been reasonable to expect a response from the *Awrajja* governor. However, instead of addressing their grievances, the governor criticized the workers for their impatience and for failing to wait for the return of their representatives from Addis Ababa while continuing to work in the factory. He also advised them to reconsider their stance and resume work. The governor further argued that their grounds for striking were unjustified and that their attempts to prevent others from returning to work went beyond the limits of a lawful strike. He concluded by assuring them that the government was committed to maintaining security, for those willing to resume work. Contrary to the strikers' demands, on March 27, 1956, *Ato Alemayehu Abebe* and *Assefa Wolde-Michael*, whose suspension had been requested by the

⁸⁷ From Workineh Wolde Amanuel to Haraghe *Teklai-gizat* Office, Date: 16/7/1984 EC.NALA 06084:

⁸⁸ From governor of Dire Dawa to Haraghe *teklai-gizat* Office; Dated *Miyaziya* 12/1948 EC; NALA: 17.2,304.05

⁸⁹ Ibid.

strikers, were permitted to continue working.⁹⁰ This decision further inflamed the situation, which escalated into violence the following day.

5.6.2 “Turn the nozzle and hit them by the butt”: The March 28, 1956 violent strike

The deadline set by the company for the employees to return to work as well as the warning issued by the *Awrajja* governor, went largely unheeded by the majority of the striking workers. On March 28, 1956, a few workers resumed their duties. Later that day, at around 4:00 o’clock local time (10:00 AM), approximately three hundred workers went to the *Awrajja* office to demand that the governor, *Ato Workineh Wolde-Amanuel*, intervene and halt operations at the factory. They argued that work should not resume until their representatives returned from Addis Ababa with an appropriate response to their demands.⁹¹

The response of *Ato Workineh Wolde-Amanuel*, the *Awrajja* governor, appeared to frustrate the striking workers, who had by then gained the support of many others. Following this, the crowd marched directly to the factory. In his report *Ato Workineh* stated:

‘‘ጥቂት ግዜ ቆይቶ ግን እግዛቱ ፅ/ቤት ተልከው ቀርበው የነበሩት እስከ 300 ያህል የሚሆኑት ሌሎችም ተጨምረው በቀጥታ ፋብሪካው ማሰሪያ ቤት ሄደው ስራቸውን በሚሰሩት ሰዎች ላይ አደጋ ለማድረስ ማከራ [. . አ] ደረጉ’’ (After a short while, about 300 workers who had been sent to the governor’s office, along with others who joined them, went directly to the factory compound and attempted to attack those who were at work).⁹²

The scale of the violence was far greater than a mere attempt at attack. According to an informant who participated in the event, striking workers, both women and men, gathered together, armed with stones and clubs, and assaulted those who had resumed work including the German managers.⁹³

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Informants: *Ato Yitna Mengsitu*, *Ato Mulugeta Demeke*, *Abdurazak Kedir*

Containing the violence required the intervention of about two hundred police force, and order was restored only through a strong and forceful response by the police.⁹⁴ According to the same informant, the confrontation between the workers and the police extended beyond the factory premise, reaching as far as the Laga-Harre plateau. The police reportedly struck the workers with the *sadaf* (the butt of their rifles), an incident locally remembered as “አፈላጊ ስጦት አደገና በሰደፍ ጭታው” (Lit. turn the nozzle and hit them by the butt)⁹⁵

The strike appeared to have ended. However, two days later, on March 30, 1956, the workers resumed their industrial action. In the aftermath of the earlier violence, approximately sixty five workers, including three representatives, were charged with assault and subsequently dismissed.⁹⁶

In response, the workers brought their case to the Ministry of Interior, alleging mistreatment, insults and intimidation by both the company and local state officials. *Ato* Workineh, however, argued that the recent violence was the result of the workers’ *tigab* (arrogance) rather than oppression, injustice, or disrespect from any officials. In contrast, in earlier instances, the company had dismissed the factory’s general manager due to management problems, including harsh criticisms and insulting treatment of workers.⁹⁷ This situation recalls the 1951 grievance report, which documented unfair practices by the German management of the factory.

Regarding the self-help association, the *Awrajja* governor portrayed the workers’ association as not genuinely intended to protect their rights and benefits, nor as serving as a bridge between the company and workers on matters of mutual concern. Instead, he suggested that its demands were aimed at harming their co-workers in an improper way.⁹⁸

The office of Haraghe *Teklai-Gizat* (Governorate General) expressed a similar view, describing the striking workers as stubborn and claiming that they sought to dismiss colleagues under the pretense of addressing ill-treatment or injustice. The office concluded that, aside from these

⁹⁴ From governor of Dire Dawa to Hararghe *teklai-gizat* Office; Dated *Miyaziya* 12/1948 EC; NALA: 17.2,304.05

⁹⁵ Informants: *Ato* Mulugeta; *Ato* Ayikuru, Yitna Mengistu

⁹⁶ From governor of Dire Dawa to Hararghe *Teklai-gizat* Office; Dated *Miyaziya* 12/1948 EC; NALA: 17.2,304.05

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

alleged pretexts, the company had never subjected the workers to actual injustice and oppression.⁹⁹

6. Conclusion

Like workers in the industrialized world, the employees of Dire Dawa Cotton Factory staged strikes to protect their rights and benefits and to fight against injustice. Through their association, they organized multiple strikes and presented their demands to the local authorities as well as the Ministry of Interior in Addis Ababa. They repeatedly took to the streets to protest management issues, nepotism, poor working conditions, long working hours and low wages.

Unfortunately, the responses from the factory management and local authorities, combined insult, rejection, intimidation, and even the use of the security forces to suppress the strikes. Despite these challenges, the majority of workers at the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory conducted successful and exemplary strikes, compelling the authorities and factory management to partially meet their demands. Among these actions, the 1956 strikes stand out for strength and scale.

These strikes ultimately forced the authorities to respond to workers` demands regarding salary increase and improvements in working conditions and hours. In the following years, the workers and their association grew stronger and more influential in Dire Dawa, eventually evolving into a labor union and becoming a founding member of the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) in 1963, making a significant chapter in the history of Ethiopia`s labor movement.

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⁹⁹ From Haraghe *Teklai-Gizat* Office to Department of Public Security Guarding of Ministry of the Interior: NALA Folder No.17.2.304.05;Dated: *Miyaziya* 19/1948EC

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- Ato* Yitna Mengistu. Date: 07, 18/09/2022. Sabean at his residence, Dire Dawa
- Woizero* Mariya Gossa, she was one of the 22 Ethiopian women sent to Italy for training.