

This book is dedicated to my Mother

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Jamaica Labrish

With Notes and Introduction
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Sangster's Book Stores Jamaica

STRIKE DAY

Chronic unemployment and bad conditions of work led to unrest in Kingston and other parts of the island in 1938. The marches of protest were the clearest sign of the crisis. The retail groceries, owned and managed by Chinese, became a target of attack by the "havenots". In this poem the black worker "comes into his own" for a day and assumes authority and status over his traditional white ruler employer: "Nayga was a-reign today, An wite man got a fall".

Gal wey yuh deh from mawnin ee?
Dah-march wid strika noh?
Dah-strike fe pay wen yuh naw work?
Gal how yuh bare-face soh?

S'pose policeman did teck yuh up?
S'pose dem did shoot yuh dung?
Wus ting wen oonoo country gal
Get climatize to tung!

Shet up yuh mout mah meck me talk,
How nayga reign today,
How we lick wite man till dem beg
An shout an start fe pray.

We tun out all de dung-tung man
An ooman from dem store,
An soh tell fe we tempa cool
Dem kean go work noh more.

We drive pon tram car free of cos'
Dis like is fe we own,
An wen we tiad o' de drive
We block de line wid stone.

We strode eena de Chiney shop,
Lock up! Lock up! we cry,
Ah laugh fe se Chiney man run
Till water come a me y'eye.

Yuh want see barefoot nayga man,
Dah-direc mota car,
Dah-fling him han an stop wite man
Wen dem dah-go too far.

Yuh want fe see me an Maggy,
Wid stick eena we han,
Dah-orda servant gal fe strike
An dah capsize dirt pan.

Maggy she tell me noh fe fraid,
Dat we wi goh a jail,
For one police is her bwoy frien,
An him wi gi we bail!

Soh me gwan bad jus like de res,
An never fraid at all,
For nayga was a-reign today,
An wite man got a fall!

WRITING HOME

Cries for better conditions of work, more wages, and equality of opportunity for people who sell their labour dominated the speeches of leaders during 1938. In this poem a letter from an unemployed labourer to his mother gives a feeling of the mood of the period among this class of people at least. He is not really working but he is nevertheless "striking" with the new union formed by Alexander Bustamante and his lieutenant St. William Grant. The poem also alludes to an early break and a subsequent reconciliation by the two labour leaders.

Dear Mamma, how is tings,
Ah hope yuh keepin well,
I have a good-time
Ah happy here so-tell,
I is not workin now but ah
Jine in a labour set
An ah 'ope to keep awn strikin
Tell some esteem jab ah get.

Far dere is two bold man forming a good Unian
One name Bustamante to'der St. William Grant.
Bustamante him is lang an step jus like him a king,
Him want favah Mass Tam ongle him foot more fling.

It hooda swell yuh head fe hear 'ow Busta talk,
De wuds weh bus fort fram him mout' more splendid
dan him walk,
An wen we all meck nize an him want we fe cease
Him jus hole-up him han like dis an genkly halla—
"Peace".

St. Grant him is nice but not soh very big,
Jus shart an black an sweet like Rosa lickle pig.
Him talk wid plenty foace an dash de oda day
Him an Busta did fall out dem patch it up some way.

So wid dem at me back ah hope to do all right
An all ah do at present is strike wid all me might.
Ah did soh glad yuh did force me fe teck de zamination
Far now ah can demands a job fe suit me edication.

Soh a mus sey good-bye for ah gwine stap write now
Teck good care a-yuhself, and look afta me cow.

DE ROYAL COMMOTION

The West India Royal Commission, chaired by Lord Moyne, was sent by the British Government to enquire into the labour disturbances in the West Indies during the late thirties. Many public leaders in the society were called to give evidence before the Commission on different aspects of Jamaican society. Rumours had it that Alexander Bustamante, the foremost mass leader of the day, organised in Brer Anancy-fashion, a group of supporters to parade outside of the venue of the Commission in habits of destitution. The intention, rumours went, was to drive home to the Commission the excesses of poverty and social hardships experienced in Jamaica at the time. This poem reconstructs the theatrical affair and upgrades it over and