

## Moengo on Strike: The Politics of Labour in Suriname's Bauxite Industry

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*Abstract:* This article examines one crucial period of contestation in colonial Suriname, the years 1941 and 1942, when sustained labour unrest in the bauxite town of Moengo led to the establishment of the first mining unions. It argues that these strikes laid the groundwork for future relations between labour, the company and the state and explores the kinds of socio-political alliances that were forged between labour and nationalist politicians on the one hand, and government and the transnational company on the other, thereby situating this particular contestation in a larger struggle over a colonial system that aligned itself with metropolitan economic interests. *Keywords:* Suriname, bauxite sector, strikes, labour organization, trade unions, nationalist politics.

I have the privilege to notify Your Excellency that Mr. Poot, the General Manager of the Surinamese Bauxite Company, has announced that, among the Company's work force [at mining town Moengo], a mobilization is once again underway to raise the wages to an amount of 50% [sic] and that, therefore, in case of non-accommodation, another strike is to be expected.

It seems to me that this mobilization is organized better than the previous one, and that it has found its starting point in the dissatisfaction which is said to prevail among the populace in Paramaribo. It appears that the mobilization is being staged by persons who have only recently returned from their leave in Paramaribo.

[Handwritten note in the margin by Governor Kielstra:] *In light of the similar mobilization at Paranam [Suriname's other mining site] last week, this points to Paramaribo as the centre of agitation.*

[Letter from the district commissioner of Marowijne, Mr. Postma, to Governor Kielstra, Moengo, 10 January 1942.]<sup>1</sup>

As plantation economy scholars have argued, Caribbean societies such as Suriname have long been characterized by extremely dependent economies in which large metropolitan or multinational companies engaged in resource production and extraction play major roles (see Levitt and Best 1978; Best 2005; Girvan 1970, 2006). Throughout the twentieth century, the bauxite industry, Suriname's major industry and largest source of foreign currency, has played a crucial role in the country's economy, making it a potent political arena. Mining unions became important political players and have been highly influential in terms of the organization and legal regulation of labour relations, going beyond the confines of the mining sector itself.

The above letter from District Commissioner Postma to Suriname's Governor Kielstra speaks of a moment of intense contestation in colonial, wartime Suriname. The pending conflict went beyond bauxite workers and the Surinamese Bauxite

Company (SBM); it also involved the Surinamese government, local politicians and, allegedly, the discontented populace in Suriname's capital city, Paramaribo. A few days after the letter was written, Moengo, Suriname's premier bauxite mining location, was on strike. Using extensive wartime powers, the district commissioner stepped in to repress the strike and force employees to resume work. The Bauxite Company summarily fired eighty activists and sent them off to Paramaribo by boat. These same workers would become the founding members of Suriname's first mining union, which was established in Paramaribo mere weeks after the strike.

Based primarily on sources from the archives of the Governor of Suriname, this article examines the strikes of 1941 and 1942 that led to the formation of those unions. It argues that the strikes constitute a crucial period of contestation that laid the groundwork for future relations between labour, the company and the state. Besides an analysis of the strike, this article also explores the kinds of socio-political alliances that were forged between labour and nationalist politicians on the one hand, and government and the transnational company on the other, thereby situating this particular contestation in a larger struggle against a colonial system that aligned itself with leading forces in what can justly be called a revamped plantation economy.

I also discuss the economic and politically volatile 1930s, which provide the background to the heated altercations that took place in the early 1940s in Moengo's mine and factory, as well as in the *Surinaamse Staten*, the local parliament. While these struggles took on a peculiar character on account of wartime provisions and prohibitions, my subsequent discussion of another conflict situation in 1954 makes clear that the alliance between state and company remained firmly in place after the war. Using secondary literature, newspaper reporting and some oral history data, the last section discusses the changing balance of power that resulted from labour organizing. It appears that, after decades of union successes, the Company increasingly found ways to countermand the many gains of organized labour.<sup>2</sup>

### **Suriname's bauxite**

Suriname, a Dutch colony until 1954 and part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands until 1975, is located on the north-eastern part of South America. It is often considered part of the mainland Caribbean on account of its history as a Dutch *wingewest*, an exploitation colony that was long dominated by large-scale sugar plantations. Bauxite, the raw material from which aluminium is made, became a major contributor to Suriname's GDP and the predominant foreign currency earner mere years after the start of bauxite production in 1920. The importance of Suriname's mining sector is duly noted in macro-economic reviews (see van Dijck 2001), yet, with the exception of a number of activist studies in the 1980s, it has rarely been the subject of study.<sup>3</sup> The literature on Moengo is even sparser. Important sources are Hesselink's little known but insightful socio-geographical study of Moengo in 1970 (1974) and a commemorative volume commissioned by SBM (Cor Lie a Kwie and Henk Esajas 1996) (see de Koning 2011 for a more general social history of Moengo). The early history of Suriname's labour movement, and particularly that of the mining unions, remains similarly understudied (Campbell 1987 focuses on Paramaribo-based unions in the postwar period). This article

therefore presents a provisional analysis of the socio-political significance of worker activism in the bauxite sector.

Concurrent with the steady decline of Suriname's sugar industry in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, large bauxite deposits were discovered, particularly in the eastern coastal plain of Suriname. Alcoa, already the major American bauxite company at the time, managed to gain widespread concessions in areas with bauxite deposits. It established a local subsidiary, the *Surinaamsche Bauxiet Maatschappij* (SBM; renamed Suralco in 1957) to mine the bauxite. The SBM was allowed to operate under extremely favourable conditions until the mid-70s. Repeated attempts to change these conditions were blocked by the Dutch government, who preferred to safeguard Dutch interests in the East Indies that renegotiation with American Alcoa could threaten (see Lamur 1985).

In 1920 SBM started mining bauxite at Moengo, an isolated site in the east of the country that until the completion of the east-west corridor in 1964 could only be reached by a long boat ride on the Cottica River (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996; Oudschans Dentz 1921). Over the years Moengo developed into a full-fledged company town, similar to the larger company town of Mackenzie in neighbouring Guyana (see Quamina 1987). In 1924 the Surinamese governor requested that management pass into Dutch hands. The new director, Ir. de Munnick, a Dutch engineer, quickly replaced the American staff with a predominantly Dutch staff. He apparently took these measures, 'Because he was of the opinion that the work could not be carried out well with the Americans present in Moengo – they were leading a 'rather free life' and 'did not adhere to the provisions of the law of the colony' (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 49). This is an early example of the close cooperation between company and state that we will encounter in the context of the 1941 and 1942 strikes.

The well-travelled Dutch bureaucrat and writer Frederik Oudschans Dentz visited Moengo in 1919 or 1920, when parts of the settlement were still under construction. He was clearly very impressed by the American accomplishments and the modern organization of the production process, labour force and settlement. The settlement was designed for 1000 workers, who 'with women and children' would make up a population of 4000 persons (Oudschans Dentz 1921, 486). Drawing upon their experiences with labour enclaves in areas such as Panama and Cuba, the Americans implemented a wide-ranging and highly advanced sanitary infrastructure. This included a system for clean drinking water, indoor sanitary facilities and sewage system, anti-malaria measures and a hospital. A power station supplied electricity to the town, the factory and the water supply. Moengo's modern infrastructure apparently outshone that of Paramaribo, the capital city (1921, 488-90).

The early labour force consisted mainly of Creole craftsmen and contract labourers from Java, complemented by Maroon and Amerindian lumber jacks from the immediate surroundings. Over the years, Javanese and Creole labourers continued to make up the majority of Moengo's work force. Initially, the production process and the company town were organized strictly along racial lines. Even though race stopped being a formal organizing principle by the 1950s, the division of labour and concomitant social hierarchies continued to be inflected by race (see de Koning 2011).

Around 1930 a more informal settlement that mainly housed Javanese labourers sprang up adjacent to the company-owned Moengo village. Wonoredjo was declared an official village community in 1941.<sup>4</sup> From that point onwards, Wonoredjo was officially governed by a village council that acted as intermediary between the government and the villagers and had an important say in village affairs, not least because it administered the use rights to the village grounds (see Ramssoedh 1990, 112-3). In 1950 Moengo and Wonoredjo counted 2687 inhabitants, in 1964, 5320 and in 1971, 6633 inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

Until the 1940s Moengo was the centre of mining activity in Suriname. That started to change in 1939 with the development of a second SBM mining location on the Suriname River upstream from Paramaribo at Paranam. In 1941 the Dutch Billiton company also initiated mining activities in Suriname at Onverdacht, close to the Paranam site. As a result, the centre of gravity of Suriname's mining sector gradually shifted away from Moengo to Paranam-Onverdacht. This shift was strengthened when, in the early 1960s, a hydroelectric dam, an alumina factory and an aluminium smelter were built at Paranam, and financed by Suralco in exchange for new bauxite concessions (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 80ff.). While Paranam and Onverdacht also developed into company towns, both sites remained relatively small as their proximity to the city allowed workers to commute from Paramaribo (de Bruijne 1976, 72-3).

Moengo remained an important hub of bauxite production and a vibrant little town. Mining came to dominate the otherwise sparsely populated district of Marowijne. In 1964, 61 per cent of its total employed male population worked in the mining sector.<sup>6</sup> By the 1980s easily accessible bauxite reserves close to Moengo were almost depleted. Military rule, which had been established in 1980, combined with the decreased competitiveness of Surinamese bauxite led to a tightening of investments from Alcoa, Suralco's mother company.<sup>7</sup> In 1984 the company suffered losses for the first time in its history, and implemented a voluntary retrenchment plan (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 200-1). The Interior War, a prolonged armed conflict that lasted from the mid-80s to the early 1990s between the state/regime and Maroon factions located in the rainforest interior, led to a temporary cessation of all mining activity and the exodus of most inhabitants in 1986. Production was resumed after a few months, but operations were restructured and managed with a significantly smaller workforce, and many parts of the production process were outsourced to labour contractors. Mines in the vicinity of Moengo had already been abandoned, but mining did continue at more distant mines.<sup>8</sup>

### **Local contestations**

An account of the turbulent 1920s, based on the 1929 notes of SBM pioneer Burside, gives an indication of the volatility of the early relations between the company and (yet-to-be-organized) labour (Burside 1986, 4). In January 1920 about 100 carpenters and labourers at Moengo went on strike, demanding higher wages. They were apparently summarily fired, since, as Burside dryly notes, the number of personnel was reduced from 256 to 156 (*ibid.*). The number of labourers again increased sharply in the course of 1920 to 1013, including 251 Javanese contract labourers who arrived between March and August of that year. In November of

that same year 300 workers went on strike. They were apparently again summarily fired. In 1921 and 1922 the company made further drastic cutbacks, until only a handful of free labourers were left besides the Javanese who were tied to their five-year contracts (Burside 1986, 4-5). In the following years, the company again started expanding its workforce. In December 1925 it had 880 employees (*ibid.*).

In the 1930s the global economic crisis caused massive unemployment and impoverishment in Suriname. In response, several organizations were founded to advance the interests of the impoverished working class and legions of unemployed (Scholtens 1986). As in other parts of the Caribbean, skilled labour migrants who had returned to Suriname from work in Curaçao's petrol industry and to a lesser extent from jobs in Guyana played a crucial role in these mobilizations (Scholtens 1986, 54-6; Bolland 2001, 358). They were inspired by experiences with trade unions abroad and, as Scholtens points out, taken aback by the levels of unemployment and poverty in Suriname. The organizations they helped found can be seen as crossovers between unions and political organizations, and mainly pleaded for the creation of jobs and poverty relief. In 1931 a meeting organized by the Surinaamse Volksbond ended in heavy clashes between protestors and police, which became known as the Hongeroproer (Hunger Revolt). In 1932 the increasingly active Surinaamsche Algemeene Werkers Organisatie, founded in the previous year, was dissolved by the colonial government. Social unrest and clashes between population and government reached their zenith with the arrival of Surinamese activist Anton de Kom from the Netherlands and his subsequent arrest early in 1933 (Scholtens 1986, 54ff; Ramsøedh 1990, 31-8). In response to popular protests and militancy, the governor submitted a number of 'anti-revolutionary decrees' pertaining to sanctions on crimes against public order and the authorities, as well as regulations concerning gatherings and publications (Ramsøedh 1990, 38). These decrees were similar to those that would be issued in response to labour rebellions in the second half of the 1930s in other Caribbean countries (Bolland 2001, 363). The years that followed were relatively calm due to repressive measures on the part of the authorities, particularly the new governor J.C. Kielstra (Ramsøedh 1990, 83-9; Scholtens 1986, 104).

Nigel O. Bolland (2001, 363) argues that colonial governments throughout the British Caribbean responded to the labour rebellions by combining police action, limited concessions and attempts to institutionalize and control the labour movement. Unlike the rest of the Caribbean (Bolland 2001; Bryan 2004), in Suriname the labour rebellions did not result in significant institutionalization of the labour movement, let alone its incorporation by the state. With a limited number of trade unions and worker associations, Suriname's pre-war labour movement is seen as nascent and devoid of real influence (Ramsøedh 1990, 135). Further research is needed to determine the exact reasons behind these diverging paths. Was it the different political-economic makeup of Suriname compared to, for example, Guyana or Trinidad, that resulted in a smaller industrial working class? Or was it the latter's stronger history of labour organizing, reaching back into the late nineteenth century (Hart 1988)? Or was Governor Kielstra's control of the country exceptionally tight? Whatever the exact causes, by the early 1940s, things seem to have changed. The development of additional mining locations at Paranam and Onver-

dacht and the tremendous importance of Suriname's bauxite for the American war industry seemed to have tipped the balance in favour of labour.

The economic crisis caused a temporary slump in bauxite production, and a reduction of the number of employees from 700 to 290 in the early 1930s (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 68). It is not clear whether there were any significant strikes in the bauxite sector during those years, nor do I know whether bauxite workers played a role in the popular protests. By the late 1930s production had picked up, and in 1942 it reached unprecedented heights due to the heavy demand from the US war industry (ESWIN 1956, 119; Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 72ff.). Because of the importance of Suriname's bauxite to the American war efforts – in 1940 some 60 per cent of the bauxite used by the American war industry came from Suriname (Fontaine 1986, 16) – American soldiers had been temporarily stationed in Suriname to protect bauxite production and transport, among other places at Moengo (Ramssoedh 1990, 166ff.).

During the early years of the Second World War, Suriname experienced a steep rise in wage levels, due to increased demand for labour owing to construction activities undertaken by the American military and the expansion of bauxite production (Ramssoedh 1990, 155), as well as mandatory wartime recruitment for the Schutterij (National Guard) and labour recruitment for work at the oil refineries in the Antilles (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 104-5; Lutchman 1986). Yet for most, higher wages could not keep up with the concurrent price hikes of both imported and locally produced goods, a situation that was exacerbated by a number of extra tax measures. Especially those on fixed wages were hit hard (Ramssoedh 1990, 151-3).

A heated debate in the Staten concerning the granting of a bauxite concession to Billiton Company on 10 July 1941 provides an indication of the labour unrest that would break out that same month.<sup>9</sup> The governor was appointed directly by the Netherlands Minister of Colonies; the Staten acted as Suriname's representative body. At the time 10 of its 15 members were chosen by an electorate drastically restricted by census suffrage; five members were appointed by the governor (Ramssoedh 1990, 133ff.). Several Staten members critiqued what they saw as excessively low wages and poor labour conditions. Member Kraan described the unbearable conditions in which workers at Smalkalden, where Billiton was building harbour facilities, were expected to work. His impassioned speech then turned to the company's refusal to grant a pay raise to those labouring away in the swamps, among others resorting to the argument that the Government pays its labourers even less, and that it wouldn't want higher wages to be paid. While, according to him, 'Asian wages' [wages paid to former contract labourers] thwarted the payment of reasonable wages in the agricultural sector, the bauxite sector should have room for reasonable pay. Members Zaal and Schneiders-Howard also pointed to the meagre wages paid by SBM. In line with what seems to have been a common view, they accused the government of attempting to keep wages in the private sector down. Reacting to what it considered a tenacious rumour, the government vehemently denied any interference from governmental side in the setting of wages in the private sector. Whatever the truth of these allegations at the time, two years later a meeting was indeed called with government officials, directors of major companies and representatives of the Dutch and American armies to agree on maximum wages (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 106-7).

## **Moengo on strike**

Against the background of rising costs of living in the early 1940s, Moengo experienced months of labour unrest and a major strike. This moment not only presents a landmark in terms of labour contestation and organization, but since it left such a rich documentary record,<sup>10</sup> it also presents us with an incisive case study of the relations between company management, workers and the state. To a large extent I rely on the extensive reporting of J. Postma, the district commissioner (DC) for the Marowijne district. The DC was the local representative of the colonial government in the Marowijne district, and functioned as the highest local authority. He was in close contact not only with the governor, but also with SBM plant manager.

In August 1941 a strike broke out when the usual annual wage increase had not been granted and a cost of living allowance had been cancelled, even though living costs had increased significantly. Furthermore, because of expanded production, most jobs in the bauxite sector had become more demanding (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 99-102). On Monday 4 August 1941, the shovel operators were the first to go on strike followed by the mill, shipping, and towboat crews, all of which were ended after substantial wage increases had been offered.<sup>11</sup> At the mill, the system of two shifts was replaced by a three shift system, which meant a reduction from a 12 to an 8-hour workday. Powerhouse personnel were granted a raise without a strike, while the electric shop personnel received a very substantial wage increase of 30 to 40 per cent after the mere threat of a strike. DC Postma emphasizes that their wages were indeed rather low. Personnel of the building and upkeep section also demanded a substantial wage increase (some 40 cents on a wage of 50 cents per hour). However, their demands were ignored and a number of men were fired. In the afternoon, the mining personnel also went on strike. What happened afterwards is not mentioned. On 6 August, the DC reported that, for the time being, the strike had ended.

In a letter dated 11 August 1941, the DC reported that the main cause of the strike had indeed been the increased pressure due to expanded production and the rise in living costs, which had gone without any compensation.<sup>12</sup> It was no coincidence that the strike had started with the shovel operators. Since their work required extensive training, they could not easily be replaced. According to the DC, advertisements for employment in Curaçao had surely contributed to their readiness to strike. The latter point was also brought up in a meeting between Governor Kielstra and his staff and SBM General Manager De Greve and Alcoa executive Cuff in November of 1941. At this meeting, the governor mentions a draft regulation that would ban certain skilled labourers from leaving the country.<sup>13</sup> This regulation was indeed implemented a few months later, when another strike broke out.

In January 1942, Moengo workers demanded, but were refused, another wage increase of 50 per cent. They seem to have also had grievances related to housing, medical treatment, leave and potable water.<sup>14</sup> In the January 10 letter quoted earlier, DC Postma writes to Governor Kielstra that the SBM plant manager has recently informed him of the likelihood of a strike, since the company was not willing to comply with renewed demands for wage increases.<sup>15</sup> Postma asks the governor to implement a number of wartime regulations designed to secure production in sensitive sectors, such as those discussed in the governor's meeting with Alcoa execu-

tives. He requests the governor uses his extended powers based on the General Authority Measure [Gouvernements Besluit] of 1941 to oblige all employees to continue their duties as normal under the directions of the DC. He, moreover, asks the governor to issue a regulation that would prohibit those workers who were laid off to leave Suriname for employment in Curaçao or Venezuela. He clearly thought these measures would decrease labour's bargaining power and help quell labour unrest.

In a second letter dated 19 January 1942, the DC gives the governor an account of the course of the strike.<sup>16</sup> On Saturday morning, 17 January, a number of suspected strike leaders were arrested as a preventive measure, he reports. Personnel from the electric shop and a crew responsible for the trenches had to be escorted to their worksites by the military, who supervised their work for a few hours. The shovels in the mine were operated by a foreman and a few American soldiers. According to the DC this dealt a significant blow to the strike, since shovel operators had again been at the centre of the strike. As the electric shop workers before them, dock personnel had to be escorted to their posts. When those who were escorted to the docks still refused to work, three persons were arrested and the rest were forcefully put to work. By afternoon, a total of 24 persons had been arrested. The next evening, on Sunday 18 January, the DC gave a radio address.<sup>17</sup> After mentioning the current battles of the allied forces in Asia, Postma switched to Moengo's striking workers. According to the DC, these were:

...well-dressed, well-housed and well-fed workers, who have up to now been spared the horrors of war.... It pays to calculate how many planes are produced out of every ship of bauxite that leaves Moengo. Therefore, anyone who, by attempting to strike, obstructs ships from leaving fully loaded and on time, is, I trust without realizing it, a traitor to our cause, a fifth columnist.... That's why, if you refuse to be more prudent,... I will use all means necessary to keep the bauxite company at Moengo going; and I possess such means. A General Authority Measure has recently been taken that opens the possibility to force anyone employed at certain companies or institutions to go to work. Violation of this legal measure is punishable with a jail sentence of maximum five years.

According to the DC, this led a majority to see the error of their ways. On Monday, an increasing number of workers wanted to get back to work. The strike seemed to have been suppressed; at least 80 people had been fired.<sup>18</sup> A telegram from SBM to Alcoa Executive Cuff mentioned that 65 'undesirables, mostly younger men' had been removed from the plant site.<sup>19</sup>

In a letter dated 28 January 1942, DC Postma reported that production had returned to normal, yet there was still a great deal of bad blood among the population. There was a broadly shared distrust and bitterness towards Europeans in general and the staff and the DC himself in particular, he wrote.<sup>20</sup> The members of the governmental committee charged with looking into the background and handling of the strike were said to relay the names of those involved to the company executive. A subordinate asked a staff member not to talk to him in public, and the usual football matches between the Dutch military and a team of workers were cancelled at the latter's request. The contingent of Javanese soldiers stationed at Moengo had apparently planned to join the strike to protest their low wages. But, the DC has-

tened to add, there is no anti-Government feeling and the local population is loyal. He concluded that 'The military intervention, whose necessity is not yet understood, has caused bad blood. They [the local population] feel unappreciated, but they don't understand what every lost hour of bauxite-production means to our armies at war'.

The effects of the strike reverberated long after the actual strike had died down. The dismissed workers arrived in Paramaribo on 20 January 1942. On 1 February, a group that called itself the Surinamese Miners Union (SMU) held its first general assembly, followed by another meeting on 1 March where a motion was carried to rehire the dismissed employees. That same evening, the Moengo Mijnwerkers Bond (MMB, Moengo Miners Union) was established at a meeting in Moengo. Unions at Paranam and Billiton followed. The three mining unions later formed the Surinamese Miners Union (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 100-2). In September 1946, against the background of a temporary slump in bauxite production, Paranam workers went on strike to demand higher wages and a vacation plan. The strike soon spread to Moengo and Billiton. After agreements about a higher wage and cost of living allowance, work was resumed in November of that same year (Fontaine 1986, 17).

The Moengo and Paranam strikes occasioned some of the first social legislation aimed at regulating labour agreements and conflicts (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 100-2). The recommendations made in the report on the strikes at Moengo led to the introduction of a bill meant to regulate labour relations in industrial companies (i.e. the bauxite industry). The 1946 Paranam strike led to the institution of a national Mediation Board that is still operative (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 1012; Campbell 1987, 109). One of its first decisions was very favourable for SBM employees: they would receive a 20 to 30 per cent pay rise, the company would assume the full amount of pension payments, housing would be improved and local employees would be considered for promotion (Campbell 1987, 111).

The clashes between bauxite workers and the company inaugurated a marked shift in labour relations. Wartime conditions were highly favourable for the alliance between the bauxite company and the colonial state. It allowed the state to depict worker resistance as the equivalent of siding with the enemy and gave it extensive executive powers to break the strike. Yet, despite labour's short-term loss, this contestation between labour and company precipitated the formation of the mining unions, which signified a permanent institutional shift that empowered the workers and tilted the balance of power in favour of labour, at the expense of the bauxite company. As I argued earlier, the expansion of bauxite production due to the development of the Paranam and Onverdacht locations, as well as the increased importance of bauxite due to heavy demand from the American war industry might have provided labour with crucial leverage. The standoff between labour and the transnational company in the bauxite industry furthermore provoked government intervention and eventually led to the creation of a legal framework for the regulation of future labour relations, thereby following similar developments in the British West Indies (see Bolland 2001).

## Debating the colonial

Staten debates in the early 1940s evidence a contestation of the colonial order in which concerns over social and labour conditions coalesced with disaffection with colonial government. Relations between governor and Staten that had been tense for decades grew sour when Governor Kielstra displayed an increasingly autocratic manner of rule. Particularly galling was his insistence on his *verindisching* policies, which had been inspired by his experience in the Dutch East Indies. Breaking with previous assimilation policies, these policies were specifically directed toward the advancement of the Asian, and more specifically Javanese, part of the population. They included the Village Community Act, discussed above in connection with Wonoredjo, as well as the Asian Marriage Act, which ratified legal pluralism with respect to family law, and the restriction of higher government functions to people with experience in the Dutch East Indies (Ramsোধ 1990, 139-45). Kielstra's *verindisching* policies met with dogged resistance from the Surinaamse Staten, which was dominated by urban-based elites. Concurrently, anti-colonial sentiment and hopes for more autonomy were kindled by the drafting of the Atlantic Charter in 1941 which discussed people's right to self-determination and a radio address by the Dutch queen in 1942 that mentioned a restructured kingdom (Ramsোধ 1990, 179-86). In this climate, several vocal Staten members positioned themselves as representatives of Surinamese workers against the allied forces of blunt profit-seeking companies and a heavy-handed, repressive governor, representing colonial interests.

After the 1942 strike in Moengo, the governor installed a committee to examine the conflict and investigate the grievances of the workers. This committee presented a confidential report to the Staten. The Staten also received addresses by the Surinamese Workers Federation and by four dismissed workers on behalf of the entire group, asking for action on behalf of those still unemployed. In a heated debate on 11 June 1942, several members criticized the confidential nature of the report, arguing that the unprotected labourers had expected more transparency.<sup>21</sup> Member de Miranda: 'Doesn't the labour peace in this country demand that those willing to work who cannot be blamed for anything but wanting to better their economic position, are reinstated in their jobs after the causes of said conflict have ceased to exist? Is it not a responsibility of the Government to intervene, if necessary with use of force, which the Government has applied on so many other terrains since the start of the war?'<sup>22</sup> De Miranda and his colleagues Zaal and Bos Verschuur also asked whether the Authority Measure that forbids the dissolution of a labour agreement in the bauxite sector without the express permission of the district commissioner did not equally apply to the company. The governor responded that, indeed, both company and labourer needed governmental permission to end their labour relation. This seems to have been a mere formality; in the same missive he mentioned that he has tried to intercede on behalf of the dismissed workers, but that the company did not agree on rehiring them. 'After all it is difficult for the government to judge to what extent the rehiring of certain labourers is to be considered undesirable for the daily routine in the company,' he notes.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the Caribbean, alliances between workers movements and causes and middle class politics were taking shape. On account of the overlap between race, class and colonial/national hierarchies, issues like the treatment of workers

could easily translate into criticism of racial discrimination or metropolitan arrogance. Workers' bread-and-butter grievances morphed into middle class political objections to aspects of the colonial order. In many cases, institutionalized workers movements formed the basis for, or were co-opted by, nationalist political parties (see Knight 2004, Bryan 2004, Bolland 2001, Sutton 2005). Karla Slocum, for example, argues that we can read conflicts such as the 1957 St. Lucia sugar strike in terms of decolonization, in which St. Lucia saw 'the rising power of a politically active Afro-St. Lucian middle-class group that, with a shift in the form of colonial administration on the island, had become simultaneously engaged in labour organizing and leadership within St. Lucia's newly formed political parties' (2007, 41).

In Suriname, workers' federations founded in the late 1930s played a prominent role in the nomination of candidates for the elections of 1941 and 1946, thus functioning as voters' associations (Campbell 1987, 76-7). This connection between unions and political parties grew stronger and more intricate in the years following World War II, when Suriname's political life came into its own with the implementation of universal suffrage in 1948 and partial autonomy in 1954. Politicians *pur sang* such as Jopie Pengel and Eddy Bruma took over from what Campbell described as socially engaged intellectuals like Bos Verschuur and Hellstone, who took the lead in labour organization and political representation in the late 1930s and early 1940s (1987, 121-2).

In 1940s-Suriname, the Staten's most vocal members were well-known public figures who were not only influential inside, but perhaps even more outside, parliament. Member Kraan was the founder of Suriname's oldest newspaper still in print, *De West*, and a veteran Staten member. Schneiders-Howard was the first female Staten member and an active and vocal social reformist (Hoefte 2007). Particularly the presence of de Miranda and Bos Verschuur in the Staten marked a growing influence of nationalist and socialist thinking in the Staten (Ramsøedh 1990, 147-8). Both de Miranda and Bos Verschuur played a leading role in the nascent union movement. De Miranda, a well-known lawyer, was involved in the establishment of the Miners' Union in 1942 (Campbell 1987, 75). Wim Bos Verschuur, an art teacher and prominent public figure, had been a founder of two workers' federations: in 1941 he established, with de Miranda, the above mentioned Surinamese Workers' Federation that sent an address to the Staten concerning the fate of the dismissed SBM workers (Breeveld 2004, 48-51; Campbell 1987, 63). Bos Verschuur had also been a key organizer of a petition against the governor. In 1943, a year after he became a member of the Staten, Governor Kielstra had him arrested and interned on charges of subversion (Ramsøedh 1990, 193-8; Breeveld 2004, 66-93).

As in St. Lucia and other parts of the Caribbean, it seems that Suriname's emergent political elite used working conditions and strikes as political platforms to critique colonial policy, particularly the autocratic rule Governor Kielstra. While ostensibly about labour relations and worker conditions, the Staten debates can thus also be read as a battle over power and hierarchy in colonial Suriname. Critical Staten members, part of the new political elite, aligned themselves with the powerful forces of about-to-be organized labour in the bauxite industry against Dutch colonial rule, most obviously in the person of the governor, who was seen to be in questionable collaboration with the executives of the country's largest companies.

## Colonial collaborations

This in-depth look into one standoff between a company, the state and labour has to be situated in its specific moment: World War II. While the extension of gubernatorial powers and the active military cooperation between the Surinamese Bauxite Company, local colonial government and the US Army were surely a wartime feature, many other aspects of this particular contestation seem to have been rather typical of the close contact and cooperation between the state and the company at the time. As much becomes clear when we consider another less known, but equally well-documented incident in 1954 in which the colonial government supported the company by sending soldiers to maintain order and productivity.<sup>24</sup>

On 17 June 1954, an altercation occurred between Mr. Ashby, an American staff member, and Mr. Stein, a field mechanic. The altercation started when Ashby caught Stein circulating a petition and eliciting signatures in connection with the upcoming union elections during work hours. Stein was summarily fired. Ashby's planned transfer to Paranam was advanced by a few months, most likely to prevent further incidents. According to SBM Director Ir. Meijer the altercation happened in an already somewhat volatile atmosphere, which, in his opinion, was primarily due to the union elections, and only to a lesser extent to the upcoming general elections. In a letter to Governor Klaasesz, dated 26 June 1954, Director Meijer mentions that SBM executives had defended Stein's dismissal at a heated meeting with workers. According to Meijer, they were able to appease the crowd.<sup>25</sup> Afterwards Stein wrote to Director Meijer pleading his case, which was accompanied by a letter from the union supporting Stein's request for leniency. Meijer responded that it had been a measured decision and that he saw no reason to reverse it. He expressed confidence in the union board's ability to see the fairness of the decision and convince the union members.<sup>26</sup>

At a union meeting two days later the relatively complacent members sitting on the board were challenged by a more radical faction. While it was not able to unseat the sitting board, it did manage to move the union to request wage increases. Around the same time, anonymous warnings reached Director Meijer concerning serious threats of violence against staff members as well as involving the dynamite storage.<sup>27</sup> Upon a request from the DC, Governor Klaasesz detached a contingent of 18 soldiers to Moengo on 26 June. Director Meijer and Police Commander Douglas arrived at Moengo the next morning. They soon learned that senior staff members had serious doubts regarding the veracity of the alarming messages. It turned out that the wife of the plant manager, who had suffered a nervous breakdown, had fabricated and relayed the alarming messages to her husband, who in turn had forwarded them to the director. On 28 June the plant manager and his wife were quietly sent abroad on what Governor Klaasesz describes as 'a so-called vacation; they, however, will not return to Suriname'.<sup>28</sup> In a second letter to the governor dated 30 June 1954, Director Meijer argues that, notwithstanding the falsification of the rumours, Police Commander Douglas was convinced that the reinforced police presence, the arrival of soldiers and the strict disciplinary measures taken by the company had exerted a salutary influence. Meijer further mentions that thanks to Police Commander Douglas, the company will have six policemen in training at its disposal until the general elections on 22 July. The costs of their presence will

be covered by the company.<sup>29</sup>

Governor Klaasesz ended his report to the Dutch minister responsible for the Dutch territories overseas regarding 'the situation at Moengo' by stating that, following his advice, the company had postponed planned cut backs until after the election, because these would have meant the dismissal of 'a number of political ringleaders'.<sup>30</sup> Rather than a wartime aberration, the close cooperative relation between the company and the government seems more like a regular feature of colonial Suriname. As the 1954 case evidences, the state and the company – governor and director, DC and plant manager – maintained close relations and amicably arranged issues of security, control and sovereignty between them. They were allies in their quest for order, productivity and control and pacification of the labour force.

However, whereas the closeness between the state and the company is reminiscent of the 1940s, the ubiquitous presence of the union presents a striking change. SBM's handling of the Stein case illustrates the growing importance of the union as a major actor, as did the company's monitoring of different factions within the union. Clearly, the SBM executive saw the union as a force to reckon with, as well as a possible ally.

### **Organized gains and losses**

When I first went [to Moengo, in 1950] there was no union. Those Americans could fire you from one moment to the next. They called that 'down the river'. After '50 that Union came. And it improved a lot. But they [the bauxite workers] have also become more demanding.... They really don't earn that badly, and the privileges they have, others don't. So I keep saying, Suralconians shouldn't complain [Nurse Fernandes, former director of Moengo hospital and Suralco staff member, interview in Paramaribo, August 2008].

Nurse Fernandes' evaluation of the influence of the mining union reflected common sentiments among the Moengonese I interviewed as part of my research on Moengo's social history (De Koning 2011). On the one hand, the union was seen as instrumental in combating the company's arbitrary omnipotence, but, as Mr. 'K.', an insightful observer and old-time Suralconian remarked, the union's many gains also initiated company strategies to circumvent the union's power.

The war years and their immediate aftermath inaugurated a history of strong labour organization and contestation concerning wages, facilities and labour relations, as well as at times national politics in the mining enclaves. In 1948 the Surinamese Mining Union, which united the Moengo, Paranam and Billiton unions, was, with 2200 members, by far the biggest labour organization in the country (Campbell 1987, 268). Moengo's workforce had a very high degree of unionization. In 1963 the MMB had 700 members, out of a workforce of around 1,000 (Lie a Kwie and Esajas 1996, 98). In 1974 the mining sector was estimated to have the second highest degree of membership in the country, 67 per cent, and a total of some 5,000 union members (Campbell 1987, 62). In 1984 the mining unions were one of the few organized forces that were able to take an effective stance against the military regime (Campbell 1999; Buddingh' 1995, 334-5; Anton de Kom-Abraham Behr Instituut 1985).

Organized labour in the bauxite sector was able to press for improvements in wages, facilities and job security, as well as, less tangibly, work relations. In 1966 the MMB concluded the first collective labour agreement in Surinamese history, which institutionalized negotiations between employers and employees at the level of the company. According to Campbell, unions in large foreign enterprises, first and foremost in the bauxite sector, were able to realize substantial gains for their members. Their success presents a sharp contrast with the limited achievements of unions active in local companies, which has given rise to a dichotomy in terms of working conditions and pay (1987, 129). The precise impact of the relatively strong labour organizations in the mining sector on conditions of employment and labour relations nationwide is a question for further research. With respect to Caribbean economies more generally, Girvan (1970) notes that income from bauxite production served to finance high-income enclaves not only in the mining sector, but also in the government bureaucracy. This resulted in an even greater dependence on mining. Did Suriname finance its bureaucracy in a similar manner and did it thereby also become doubly dependent on bauxite revenues?

As an organized force, bauxite workers were able to make many gains in terms of job security, wages and social and health benefits. Yet, as Mr. K. noted, many of these gains seem to have been countermanded by a creeping disinvestment on the part of the company, as well as its tendency to increasingly resort to outsourcing. From the 1970s onward the company seems to have slowly but surely substituted its earlier role as stern paternalistic provider with that of merely an employer, getting rid of most of its extensive facilities. It also resorted to increasingly far-reaching outsourcing of parts of the production process, thereby effectively undercutting organized labour and significantly reducing labour costs. While in 1964 only 2 per cent of those active in the mining sector worked as casual labourer, between 2002 and 2006, the number of directly employed personnel went down from some 60 to less than 40 per cent (Census 1964; Ferrier 2007, 24).

Outsourcing effectively led to insecure working conditions reminiscent of pre-union times. In 2008 Suralco's outsourcing policy became a hotly contested issue on the work floor, in the newspapers and in national politics (see DWT 18/APR/2008). In 2009 pressure from workers, public opinion and the government eventually resulted in a compromise regarding Suralco's responsibility for the employment conditions of contract labourers (DWT 26/SEP/2009). This small victory notwithstanding, it seems that rather than the capitalist enclaves that Girvan observed as typical of Caribbean economies, we see the expansion of a large grey zone of flexible labour around an increasingly small core of well paid, secure employees.

## **Conclusion**

Because of its macroeconomic importance, strategic nature and not least the highly skilled and organized proletariat that came into being in the mining enclaves, the bauxite industry has constituted an important political arena in twentieth century Suriname. This article has focused on one crucial period of contestation, the Moengo strikes of 1941 and 1942 that led to the establishment of the mining unions. The 1941 and 1942 strikes at Moengo and their aftermath showed not only the strength of the alliance between the state and the bauxite company, but also an

emergent partnership between more critical Paramaribo-based politicians and public figures on the one hand, and vocal workers on the other. Political mobilization and workers activism went hand in hand; critiques of Governor Kielstra's heavy-handed rule and his metropolitan political directives reverberated with workers' demands for better wages and working conditions. The Moengo strikes were therefore not only crucial in the domain of labour relations, but also signalled the further integration of labour and political activism. They thereby became part of the larger contestation of the colonial order in wartime Suriname, and laid the foundation for more intricate alliances and mobilization in the decades to come.

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## Notes

1. Nationaal Archief (NA), Archief van de Gouverneur van Suriname: Afdeling Kabinet Geheim, 1885-19A51 (AGS/KG 1885-1951), Inventory no. 516; Letter no. 2. All translations by the author.
2. For more on these interviews and the interviewees, see de Koning 2011.
3. In the context of the left-wing climate of the 1970s and 1980s and the then popular dependencia theories, Suriname's bauxite industry became the focal point of left-wing political criticism. See Anton de Kom-Abraham Behr Instituut (1985) and van Klaveren (1974).
4. *Verslag der Handelingen van de Staten van Suriname (Handelingen), 1941-1942*, p. 98 and *Bijlagen* (24, 1-3).
5. Statistical data about the number of inhabitants and percentages of those employed in mining were computed from the 1950, 1964 and 1971 censuses. Due to several changes in the census districts between 1950 and 1964 and the differential treatment of 'bushland population' in all the three given years, the data are not fully comparable.
6. Taken from the 1964 Census, this figure excludes a large share of the district's population that was not included in the census since it concerned people considered to be 'living in tribes' (in *stamverband levend*).
7. Interview with Suralco Executive Warren Pederson, Paramaribo 2008. Lie a Kwie and Esajas (1996, 1999) date Alcoa's increased reluctance to invest in its Surinamese operations to the late 1980s.
8. February 2010 update on Suriname's bauxite sector, available at <http://www.bauxietinstituut.com/>

- Bauxietsectoral.g.aspx; last accessed 8 June 2010.
9. *Handelingen 1941-1942*, 36ff.
  10. NA, AGS/KG 1885-1951, 516. See also the government missive 2131 to the Staten which gives a short account of the strike (*Handelingen 1942-43*, pp. 15-16).
  11. NA, AGS/KG 1885-1951, 516, Letter no. 58 from the DC of Marowijne to the governor, dated 5 August 1941.
  12. NA, AGS/KG 1885-1951, 516, Letter no 64 from the DC, dated 11 August 1941.
  13. NA, AGS/KG 1885-1951, 516, Short report of the meeting on Monday 3 November 1941.
  14. *Handelingen 1942-1943*, Interpellation by Mr. de Miranda c.s. concerning Moengo-conflicts, p. 12.
  15. NA, AGS/KG 1885-1951, 516, Letter no. 2 from the DC, dated 10 January 1942. Cf. Interpellation De Miranda c.s. 11 June 1942, *Handelingen 1942-1943*, pp. 11-14.
  16. NA, AGS/KG 1885-1951, 516, Letter no. 4 from the DC, dated 19 January 1942.
  17. NA, AGS/KG 1885-1951, 516, Transcription of radio address by DC J. Postma on Sunday 18 January 1942.
  18. Letters from the S.A.F. (Surinamese Workers' Federation) in which four of the dismissed workers mention a number of 80; De Miranda mentions a number of 83 dismissed workers (*Handelingen, 1942-1943*, pp. 11-14).
  19. NA, AGS/KG 1885-1951, 516, Telegram from SBM, dated 22 January 1942.
  20. NA, AGS/KG 1885-1951, 516, Letter no. 4 from the DC, dated 28 January 1942.
  21. *Handelingen, 1942-43*, pp. 10-16.
  22. *Handelingen, 1942-43*, p. 12.
  23. *Handelingen, 1942-43*, p. 16.
  24. Nationaal Archief (NA), Gouverneur van Suriname (GS) 1951-1975, Inventory number 1211, Letter no. 733 by Governor Klaasesz to the Minister of 'Overzeese Rijksdelen', dated 30 June 1952, with appended letters by SBxM Director Meijer reporting on the incidents, by mechanic Stein and the MMB to Director Meijer, and a report by staff member Ashby.
  25. NA, GS 1951-1975, 1211.
  26. NA, GS 1951-1975, 1211, Letter from Director Meijer, dated 26 June 1954.
  27. *Ibidem*.
  28. NA, GS 1951-1975, 1211, Letter no. 733.
  29. *Ibidem*.
  30. *Ibidem*.

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