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The Impact of the Convention 29 in British East Africa, 1932-1961

Abstract:

The passage of the International Labour Organization's Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) in 1930 was a momentous event in global labor history, signaling an ideological, if not practical, transition away from coercive labor practices like private sector forced labor and slavery. The Forced Labour Convention prohibited private sector forced labor among signatory states, while also calling on them to ban government-forced labor, but within a nebulous time frame. Excluding the Republic of Liberia, Britain was the first colonial power in Africa to adopt the Convention on 3 June 1931, with France (1937), Belgium (1944) and Portugal (1961) following later.

Nonetheless, despite the sanctioning of forced labor for private business interests, there were loopholes in Convention 29 that allowed European colonial powers to continue to employ various coercive labor practices. In British East Africa, which included Uganda, Kenya, and Tanganyika (Tanzania), the annual compliance reports reveal the positive impacts of Convention 29, but also show how it was less effective in curtailing certain coercive labor practices. In this presentation, we contend that the passage of the Convention did accelerate the progression toward the abolition of certain coercive labor practices, but it also resulted in local administrations weakening the goals of the Convention by shielding coercive labor practices under the rubrics of "tradition" and Indirect Rule.

Bio:

Dr. Opolot Okia is an International Fellow at *Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen (KWI)* and professor of modern African History at Wright State University in the USA. His research examines forced labor in colonial East Africa and the impact of changing international discourses on acceptable labor practices. He has published several articles and two books, *Communal Labor in Colonial Kenya: The Legitimization of Coercion, 1912-1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and *Labor in Colonial Kenya After the Forced Labor Convention* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Dr. Okia has also served as a Fulbright scholar at Moi University in Kenya (2007-2009) and Makerere University in Uganda (2016-2017).