Cross Currents in the Western Caribbean: Marcus Garvey and the UNIA in Central America

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CROSS CURRENTS IN THE WESTERN CARIBBEAN:

Marcus Garvey and the UNIA in Central America

— *Ronald Harpelle*

Abstract...

In 1910 Marcus Garvey migrated to Costa Rica where he obtained employment with the United Fruit Company and made his first contact with the people of the Western Caribbean, a region that became one of the most important sites on UNIA activity outside of the United States. The Caribbean shores of Central America were home to disparate groups of people of African descent. Some were the descendants of slaves brought to the isthmus during Spanish colonial times, others were coastal dwellers like the Garifuna who were exiles from the Caribbean, but most, like Marcus Garvey, were West Indian migrants who arrived in late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. The diversity of historical experiences of the people of African descent who landed on the Central American isthmus in the centuries after the Spanish conquest is the most important factor in understanding the character of the UNIA and its struggles in the region. Arriving over a span of four hundred years, they came from a variety of different places, landed at different times and had different experiences with the Hispanic republics. This was the context within which the UNIA sought to organize on the isthmus and it

explains why Garveyism in Central America was primarily a reflection of the concerns of British West Indian sojourners.

Keywords: *Central America, Afro-Hispanics, Limón, Costa Rica, British West Indians, Panama Canal, Bocas del Toro, Colón.*

Sinopsis...

En 1910 Marcus Garvey emigró a Costa Rica, donde obtuvo empleo con United Fruit Company y estableció su primer contacto con personas en el Caribe Occidental, una región que se convirtió en uno de los lugares más importantes de actividad de la Asociación Universal para el Mejoramiento del Negro (UNIA) fuera de Estados Unidos. Las costas caribeñas de América Central eran el hogar de grupos diversos de personas de descendencia africana. Algunas de estas personas eran descendientes de esclavos que fueron llevados al istmo en la época colonial de España, otros habitaban en la costa, como los Garifuna, que habían sido exiliados de las islas del Caribe, pero la gran mayoría eran —como Marcus Garvey— emigrantes del Caribe angloparlante que llegaron a finales del siglo XIX o principios del XX. La diversidad de experiencias históricas de las personas de descendencia africana que se establecieron en el istmo de América Central en los siglos posteriores a la conquista española es el factor más importante para entender el carácter de UNIA y sus luchas en la región. Su arribo se extendió durante cuatrocientos años, venían de diferentes lugares, desembarcaron en épocas distintas y habían tenido experiencias distintas con las repúblicas hispanas. Éste era el contexto dentro del cual UNIA buscó organizarse en el istmo y explica por qué el garveyismo en América Central fue primordialmente un reflejo de los intereses de las personas provenientes del Caribe inglés.

Palabras clave: *América Central, afro-hispanos, Limón, Costa Rica, antillanos británicos, Canal de Panamá, Bocas del Toro, Colón.*

Résumé...

En 1910 Marcus Garvey émigra à Costa Rica, où il trouva un emploi avec la United Fruit Company, et il y établit son premier contact avec les gens de la Caraïbe Occidentale, région qui est devenue un centre d'activités très important de l'Association Universelle de l'Amélioration du Noir (UNIA) en dehors des Etats Unis. Les côtes caribéennes de l'Amérique Centrale étaient le foyer des divers groupes de descendance africaine. Parmi ceux-ci certains étaient des descendants d'esclaves amenés en Amérique Centrale à l'époque coloniale espagnole, d'autres habitaient les côtes, à savoir, les Garifuna, exilés de la Caraïbe, mais la plupart était comme Marcus Garvey, des émigrés de la Caraïbe anglophone qui sont arrivés à la fin du XIXième siècle ou au début du XXième. La diversité d'expériences historiques des gens de descendance africaine qui se sont établis dans l'Amérique Centrale dans les siècles suivant la conquête espagnole, constitue le facteur le plus important pour comprendre le caractère de l'UNIA et ses luttes dans la région. L'arrivée de ces populations s'est étalée sur quatre cents ans, ils venaient de différents endroits, ont débarqué à différentes époques et ont eu des expériences différentes avec les républiques hispaniques. Ceci était le contexte à l'intérieur duquel l'UNIA chercha à s'organiser en Amérique Centrale et il explique pour quoi le garvéisme y a été, surtout, un reflet des intérêts des gens provenant de la Caraïbe anglaise.

Keywords: *L' Amérique Centrale, afro-hispaniques, Limón, Costa Rica, antillais britanniques, canal de Panama, Bocas del Toro, Colón.*

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The West Indian immigrant communities that grew as appendages to the corporate enclaves of Central America were not only Marcus Garvey's first glimpse at the world outside of the British Caribbean, but they also provided the backdrop for some of the most successful international recruitment and organization by the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). A review of the development of the UNIA on the Central American isthmus reveals that the organization's success was tied to the struggles of the British West Indians who ventured to the region in search of a better future. Upon arrival at their destinations, most West Indians found that systematic segregation and harsh working conditions dulled and clouded the promise of prosperity they left home with. Like Marcus Garvey, most British West Indian sojourners moved on or returned to their islands of origin. Others remained on the isthmus where they established new homes for themselves and their families but they endured an isolated existence. They were ostracized by the Hispanic majority around them; they were dependent on American expatriates for their livelihoods; and they were common targets for the racism that permeated the corporate enclaves.[1] Consequently, when the UNIA arrived in the region there were thousands of West Indian residents of Central America hoping for a saviour who would point the way to a better future (See Chomsky 1996; Conniff 1985; McLean Petras 1988).

Although the role of the UNIA in Central America is important, the key issue in understanding the history of the organization is found in the diversity that existed within the British West Indian communities of the region. Every village, town and city along the Atlantic coast of the isthmus was Pan-Caribbean in its composition, and, like elsewhere in the Caribbean, cleavages along religious, social or ethnic lines were

common.[2] West Indian societies are complex because their histories and identities are obscured by hundreds of years of slavery and the colonialism that replaced it. One of the only aspects of the West Indian identity that could be used to unite people from such a broad social spectrum was the necessity everyone had of working together to protect themselves from discrimination against people of African descent. The UNIA arrived in Central America in 1918 and built its house upon a terrain Marcus Garvey had surveyed years earlier. The problem was that the foundation for the organization had the same cracks as the immigrant communities who were attracted to the UNIA. On the Central American isthmus the UNIA was forced to come to terms with the divisions inherent in a diversified complex of Pan-Caribbean and multi-class identities found in each community.

Along the Atlantic coast of the Central American isthmus, the popularity of the UNIA was rooted in the desperate situation British West Indians immigrants found themselves in. The Caribbean migrants were caught in the cross currents of a declining British Empire, the new imperialism of the United States and the growing aspirations of several impoverished Hispanic Republics. They were third country nationals, British subjects living in Hispanic republics and working for some of the first modern multinational corporations. As West Indian workers disembarked from the ships that carried them to jobs on the isthmus, they were greeted on the docks by Jim Crow, a system of segregation, differential pay scales and racial attitudes imported from the United States. The subtleties of ethnicity and class divisions in the West Indies, although apparent to the workers themselves, were not fully understood, but exploited nonetheless, by the men who ran the construction projects and banana plantations of Central America.

The corporate managers responsible for operations in Central America and Panama had several reasons for considering West Indians to be an attractive workforce. For one thing, the Caribbean basin, functioned as an enormous labour pool that served to keep wages down and provide conditions that ensured a captive workforce. The decline of the British Carib-

bean economy in the second half of the nineteenth century, coinciding as it did with the end of slavery, resulted in the creation of a massive free labour force that was geographically isolated and mobile.[3] These factors combined to ensure that the companies which imported West Indian workers to the region could exercise inordinate control over the lives of their employees.

As part of the labour strategy employees were supplied transportation, housing, schools, all manner of merchandise, and medical services, making West Indians, in the eyes of their employers, a malleable workforce. People who stepped out of line could easily find themselves without a job and a place to live. The various corporations of the region also cooperated with one another to ensure that agitators were isolated, monitored, harassed and arrested if need be. West Indians also did not enjoy the full protection of the governments of the host countries in the Hispanic Caribbean. As foreign nationals, West Indians were not citizens and often had to rely on the benevolence of their corporate masters and British officials to guarantee their interests (See Harpelle 2000).

Another advantage to using West Indian workers was that in addition to being a captive workforce, they also tended to be better educated than their Hispanic counterparts and they spoke English, which was the language of U.S. corporate enterprise in the region. After emancipation in the Caribbean, British colonial authorities introduced an education system that served to meet the changing needs of the island economies (See Bacchus 1994). Although vocational training was emphasized, qualified bureaucrats and professionals were also needed because the colonial administrations of the newly free societies of the British Caribbean required the services of an educated West Indian élite. The majority of West Indians who went to the region worked as labourers, but some became peasant farmers, small business owners, or occupied skilled positions such as clerks, school teachers, nurses and accountants. The result for the U.S. corporations operating in Central America was the availability of a literate and skilled labour pool that could supply almost any need.

Finally, West Indians were but one part of a tripartite labour pool that also included Hispanics and Amerindians, and the corporations of the region used ethnic divisions between the three groups to manipulate workers. Philippe Bourgois demonstrates that the United Fruit Company developed a conscious policy of dividing workers along ethnic lines in order to prevent unified action of their part (Bourgois 1989:85-110). Segregation was common on the job and in the communities established by the corporations. The animosity between West Indians and others was obvious to observers and was a functional part of company operations (Echeverri-Gent 1992:285). Although they inhabited the same communities and worked for the same employers, not all workers were treated alike. Better education and a facility with the English language meant that West Indians often enjoyed the status of a labour élite, getting better jobs and higher pay than the locals. The result was a high level of animosity among Hispanics toward West Indians.[4]

In addition to competition on the job, British West Indians were seen by some as an expression of the contentious foreign investment schemes hatched at the turn of the century and a daily reminder of the subservience of national interests to international commerce. As non-citizens and an obviously foreign element, British West Indians were often subject to denigration by their Hispanic co-workers and neighbours. The resentment was not limited to the enclaves established by the corporations. In the Hispanic cities and towns of the interior, West Indians were considered a threat to the national identities of the various states in the region. Nationalism blended with racism to isolate people who were seen to live up to the image Hispanics in the region had of people of African descent

No other region on earth has seen as much mixing of peoples from around the world as Latin America and the Caribbean and, with the exception of Costa Rica, Central Americans have transformed miscegenation into a symbol of nationalism. Consequently, to view Central American reaction to West Indian immigration solely in terms of race and racism is to obscure the history of relations between Hispanics and people of African descent on the isthmus. In the mid-nineteenth cen-

tury, when the first wave of West Indian workers arrived in the region, communities of people of African descent were already well established in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. However, West Indians, unlike the people of African descent who preceded them, were considered a threat because they competed for employment, did not assimilate and they came into frequent contact with Hispanics.[5]

As elsewhere in the Americas, relations between Africans and Europeans were conditioned by the importance of slavery in the local economy. Modest numbers of slaves were brought to Central America. Manumission created a group of free persons of colour and intermarriage served to obscure racial divisions during the colonial period. Similarly, independence from Spain in 1821 coincided with emancipation to create new republics where the issue of racial identity was eclipsed by nationalism. Although slavery existed in every country in the region, the number of people of African descent in bondage was relatively small. In Costa Rica where as few as 100 people were set free after Independence, the image of a "white settler" prevailed and the descendants of the slaves faded into the mainstream (Meléndez Caverri and Duncan 1989: 48).[6] As a consequence, during the nineteenth century national identities were forged and most of the descendants of slaves brought to the isthmus were fully integrated into Hispanic culture.

In Panama, where the African presence was more evident after emancipation, mainstream society incorporated the descendants of slaves. Three hundred years of miscegenation and acculturation combined with Panama's isolation to lay the foundations for the emergence of an Afro-Panamanian subculture known as the "negros coloniales." Although "negros coloniales" were targets of discrimination, as Afro-Hispanics they were well-integrated and accorded space within the country's national self-identity. As a group, they were easily identified by their Hispanic surnames, their Panamanian Spanish and their social and geographical dispersion. The arrival of thousands of English-speaking, Protestant sojourners from the West Indies served to reinforce the identity of "colonial blacks" as Panamanians and afforded the group an opportunity to re-position

itself within the framework of the national identity. Therefore, despite their skin colour, "negros coloniales" were more able to blend into the mainstream and had less interest in an organization like the UNIA that was dominated locally by West Indians.[7]

Two other groups of people of African descent also preceded the arrival of the West Indians. The first group was tied to British entrepreneurs who brought hundreds of slaves and free persons of colour to the Mosquito coast which stretched from Honduras to Costa Rica. Many of these people settled and had children with indigenous people from the region. The result was the evolution of an Afro-Amerindian identity among the Miskito Indians of the Caribbean coast. Similarly, in the 1790s the ancestors of the Garifuna, or Black Caribs, arrived and settled (See González 1988). The Garifuna were an Afro-Amerindian group from St. Christopher who were brought to Roatan island off the coast of Honduras by the British who feared a spread of the troubles that threatened planters in Haiti after the French Revolution. Approximately 4,000 men, women and children were taken to Roatan island which they soon abandoned for the Atlantic coast. Once on the mainland the Garifuna, who depended on the sea for part of their subsistence needs, spread along the coast. When the West Indians arrived in the later half of the nineteenth century, these two groups, the Miskito and the Garifuna, lived in isolated communities along the coast between Belize and Costa Rica. Unlike the descendants of slaves brought to the region before independence, the Miskito and Garifuna were not assimilated and remained apart. Their "Amerindianess" and "Africaness" posed a problem, but these peoples lived in small villages in the most remote regions of the Hispanic republics and were easily overlooked.

Upon arrival in the region, West Indians found that they had little in common with the people of African descent already resident on the Central American isthmus. The descendants of colonial slaves were assimilated and, although discriminated against, accepted as part of Hispanic society. In contrast, the Afro-Amerindians were not assimilated and were

not accepted. However, as a small population living in a region that was not fully incorporated into the national economy, they could be ignored because they did not pose a threat to Hispanic society. People of African descent landed on Central American and Panamanian shores for centuries prior to the nineteenth century, but when the UNIA began recruiting descendants of the early migrants were not as interested in the organization's aims as the West Indians who arrived at the turn of the twentieth century. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of the history of the UNIA in Central America was the British West Indian character of the organization and its failure to recruit significant numbers of Afro-Hispanics. Although the UNIA stood for the universal concerns of people of African descent in the Americas, on the Central American isthmus it was a West Indian organization that spoke mainly to the concerns of an immigrant community.[8]

The arrival of the English-speaking, Protestant West Indians challenged prevailing notions of race and of the place people of African descent were to occupy in society. The first wave of mass migration from the British West Indies began in 1850 with the construction of the Panama Railroad. The railroad across Panama was finished in 1855, but many West Indians remained on the isthmus where they had built communities (Senior 1978: 11-12). In the decades that followed a number of other opportunities arose in the region causing West Indians to spread along the length of the Atlantic coast from Panama to Belize. The migration of West Indians to Central America peaked in the first decades of the twentieth century then diminished rapidly and all but ended in the 1930s.[9] In the course of these waves of migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, West Indians became the single largest non-Hispanic immigrant group in most of the republics on the isthmus.[10]

As a result of the unregulated nature of Caribbean migration, the number of British West Indians who ventured to the western shores of the Caribbean in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can only be estimated. Several hundred thousand people went to and through the region between 1850

and 1930. West Indians arrived first in search of opportunities in the construction of railways in Panama and Costa Rica, then to work on the French and U.S. canal projects in Panama and to work in the banana industry that developed throughout the region. The vast majority of West Indian workers merely passed through the area, spending anywhere from several months to many years in one or more of the Hispanic republics. Panama, received the largest number of Caribbean migrants, but each of the other Central American republics bordering on the Atlantic ocean saw the arrival of thousands of British West Indians.[11]

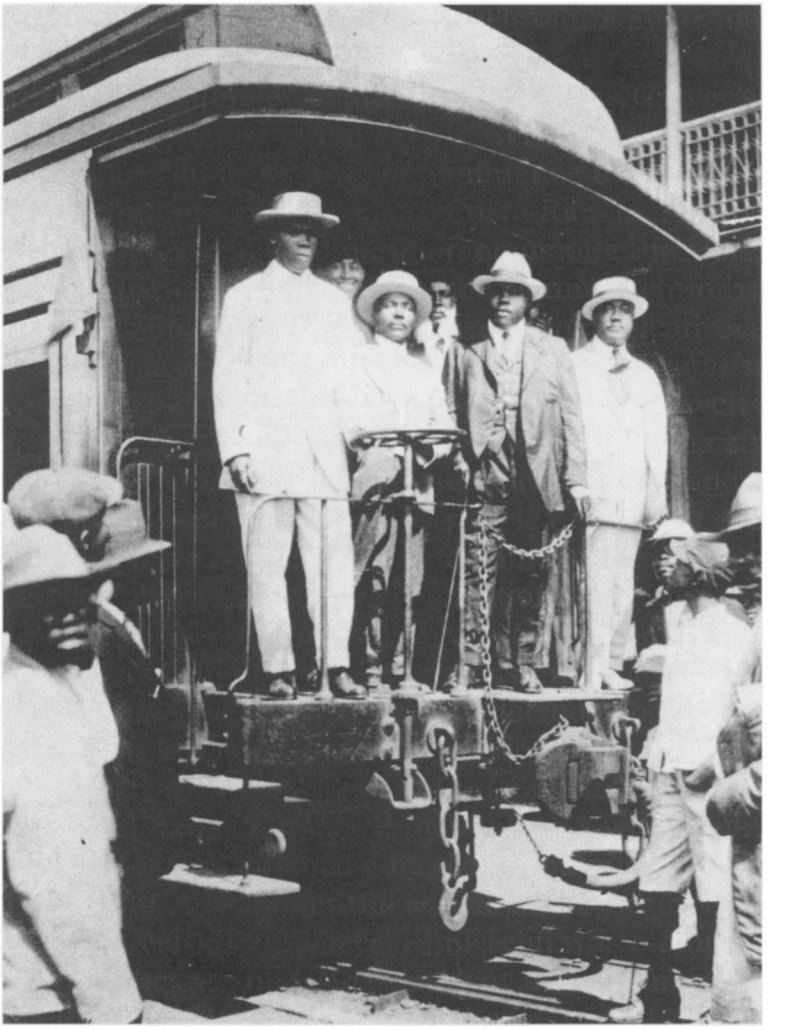
British West Indians, unlike Colonial Blacks or the Afro-Amerindian inhabitants of coastal villages, were considered a threat because they arrived in very large numbers over a short period of time. Much like the companies they worked for, the Jamaicans, Barbadians and other Caribbean migrants were considered to be itinerants who would never become a permanent fixture in the region. As the twentieth century began to unfold and the interests of the Central American republics diverged from those of the United States, the large corporations operating on the isthmus and their imported labour were seen increasingly as a challenge to national sovereignty. West Indians were an obvious target for the concerns raised by those who sought to challenge the domination of the multinational corporations in their midst. Consequently, people of African descent, along with other non-Europeans were singled out by legislation that restricted, denied, or even stripped them of their legal rights (Harpelle 1993; 2001). With respect to the British West Indians, the objective of the governments in the region was to control and curtail the immigration of people of African descent in order to prevent what some considered to be the "Africanization" of the isthmus.[12]

The general hostility toward West Indians served to provide a foundation for the UNIA and the organization spread quickly throughout the Atlantic lowlands of Central America. Liberty Halls became important meeting places and the association became the leading secular organization in most sizable communities. By the mid-1920s, even when the organization was

in decline, there were reported to be twenty-three branches of the UNIA in Costa Rica, forty-nine in Panama and the Canal Zone and a total of eighteen in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. According to one source, one third of all UNIA branches outside the United States were in Central America. Despite the small size of the population of potential members, the 90 branches that were active in the region reveal an extremely high level of participation (Martin 1976: 369-373).[13]

Although the reasons for the popularity of Garveyism in Central America are similar to those that provided for the development of the UNIA elsewhere, there was an added dimension to the organization on the Hispanic shores of the Western Caribbean. West Indians were a geographically concentrated, easily identified, foreign element that could be singled out as a scapegoat for all that ailed Central America and its Hispanic majority. The West Indians who went to the region encountered racism and a system of segregation like none they had experienced before. On the one hand West Indians worked for a management corps who brought with them notions of labour management and race based on experience in the United States. On the other hand, the Hispanic societies that surrounded the enclaves viewed West Indians differently. West Indians were viewed by many Central Americans as part of the assault on the region by U.S. corporations and their presence threatened to undermine Hispanic society. Consequently, every West Indian community in the region dealt with racism and severe ostracism on a daily basis.

Marcus Garvey witnessed the condition of the West Indian workers during his brief, but significant stay in Costa Rica and Panama. Although he had been attentive to social inequities in Jamaica, his arrival in Costa Rica in 1910, where he found work as a time-keeper with the United Fruit Company, served to open his eyes to the plight of the thousands of labouring men and women who had arrived before him. In Limón, Costa Rica, Garvey encountered a large pan-Caribbean West Indian community who came and went in response to employment opportunities. The entire community in Limón



Marcus Garvey in Costa Rica. Source: The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers Project, UCLA.

existed as an appendage to the banana industry and were seen as a threat to Costa Rica's self-image as a "white settler" society.

During his stay in Limón Marcus Garvey witnessed abuses that were common in an enclave controlled by the largest employer on the isthmus. He saw the living and working conditions endured by the British West Indian sojourners, and in Costa Rica began his struggle to unite people of African descent everywhere. His efforts to confront United Fruit and challenge the relationship between West Indians and Costa Rican

society did not go unnoticed. Within a short while Garvey also found that one of the obstacles to change was the existence of a local, self-styled, West Indian élite who seemed to accept the dominance of a "white" managerial corps. In Garvey's view these people accommodated the managers at the expense of fellow community members. Therefore, his later ideological struggles with W.E.B. Du Bois over relations between the races had their origins in Limón.

Marcus Garvey launched his career as a radical shortly after his arrival when he became the editor of a local paper called the *Nation* which he used to attack what he saw as injustices committed against West Indians. His criticisms of the living and working conditions endured by his fellow sojourners soon caused the defenders of the status quo to rally against Garvey and the *Nation*. The reaction of the West Indian élite was to ridicule Garvey as a young upstart and then to isolate him as a threat to the well being of the entire community. By the end of his stay community leaders turned both a deaf ear to his concerns about the treatment of British West Indians and a blind eye to physical attacks against Garvey.

For several months Marcus Garvey challenged the status quo within the West Indian community and was regularly attacked in the *Limón Times*, a rival newspaper. A turning point came in early 1911 when Garvey attempted to organize a celebration of King Edward's coronation without consulting the community élite. At about the same time he accused a "white" fire department of ignoring West Indian businesses during a fire that engulfed several buildings in Limón's downtown area. Garvey's criticism of the firefighters was an indictment of Costa Rican society and the United Fruit Company's treatment of people of African descent. The *Nation* was put out of business shortly afterwards when a group of angry firemen smashed the newspaper's printing press and United Fruit refused to fix the broken parts. To make matters worse, the hackles of the self-styled West Indian élite were raised by his temerity to raise such issues in public and they responded by circulating rumours of Garvey's misappropriation of funds for the upcoming coronation celebration in Limón. As a result, Marcus Garvey

was forced to leave town because he was unemployed and turned into a pariah.

From Costa Rica, Garvey ventured to Panama where, after a brief stay, he embarked on a tour of the region, visiting Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. Each of the places Garvey visited were corporate enclaves where West Indians were working (Edwards 1967: 7-8). In every instance he found the same exploitation, segregation and hostility toward people of African descent. According to one source, Garvey "observed the universal degradation of the black race.... [and] agitated" along the way (Martin 1976: 5). During this period Garvey's ideology began to take the shape that would later be the basis for the UNIA. Marcus Garvey witnessed and experienced the degradation of the people who sought security as imported labour in the mines, on the construction projects and on the plantations of Central and South America. The creation of the UNIA came later, but Garvey's experiences in Central America convinced him of the need to organize people of African descent.

Marcus Garvey's impressions of the region were reinforced during his stay in Panama where he witnessed the same overt discrimination against people West Indians. In 1911 the Panama Canal was three years away from completion, conditions of near full employment existed and the West Indian community was vibrant. Upon arrival in Colon, where the largest West Indian community on the isthmus lived, Garvey found employment with *La Prensa - The Press*, a Panama City-based newspaper that published in Spanish and English (Lewis 1988: 45).[14] Garvey found that, with few exceptions, people of African descent were paid in silver currency while foreigners of European descent and a small number of skilled Panamanians were paid in gold.[15]

The payroll distinctions also extended to the accommodation provided to workers and their families, and to their access to schools, hospitals and to other public facilities. To make matters worse, working conditions were often intolerable and nearly 20,000 people had already lost their lives while working on the Canal project.

When Garvey's *Negro World* began to arrive on the Central American isthmus, the fortunes of resident British West Indians had changed for the worse. Banana production on the Atlantic coast of Central America peaked in the early 1910s and thereafter the industry began a gradual decline. In the face of a declining industry, West Indian workers engaged in a protracted struggle with the fruit company to maintain a subsistence level of income. Theirs was a losing battle because, in addition to the decline in the banana industry, the completion of the Panama Canal served to add thousands of additional workers to an already massive labour pool in the region. As with the previous construction projects that attracted West Indians to the isthmus, many thousands of sojourners did not return to their islands of origin. Some were destitute and could not afford passage, others were established and reluctant to move and thousands moved about the region in search of elusive new opportunities.

The outbreak of World War One (WWI) also had a severe impact on the economy of the region.[16] When war broke out in Europe, fruit companies were the largest employers of West Indian labour in the region. During WWI the volume of bananas imported by the United States decreased by a third and with the decline came an increase in unemployment on the plantations of the isthmus and a decline in the wages paid by the fruit companies (Murray 1919: 426). Fewer ships and declining exports also meant shortages of basic goods and a dramatic increase in the cost of importing items. Prices increased by over one hundred percent on some food items. Nevertheless, according to one report, the West Indians of the region bore "their trials patiently" (Murray 1919: 405).

West Indians were patient because they identified with the British Empire and were quick to rally in support of the war effort. As British subjects the West Indians of the region responded to the war in the same way as their counterparts throughout the Caribbean. Funds were raised to help in the war effort, self-imposed rationing occurred and many young men signed up to join the West India Regiment. In total five battalions were raised in Costa Rica and Panama and thou-

sands of men went to war. In Europe West Indian volunteers became dissatisfied with their treatment and in late 1918 soldiers of the West India Regiment in Taranto, Italy rioted over the discriminatory policies of the British War Office. During the war, British West Indian soldiers of African descent were not allowed to rise above the rank of sergeant and even though they were trained as a fighting force, they were assigned the tasks of labour units (Elkins 1977). The riot resulted in a hasty decision by the British to demobilize the West India Regiment, thereby sending several thousand disgruntled and disillusioned men back to the Central American isthmus where they soon joined the UNIA.

During the war, British West Indian workers in Central America waited for the time when jobs would return and wages would improve. After the war they watched as a return to prosperity in the United States and Canada improved the export market for bananas. However, although higher wages and lower prices were expected, workers' needs were ignored by employers interested in capitalizing on the end of the hostilities in Europe. As a consequence of the destitution experienced by the West Indians and the seeming inability or reluctance of their corporate sponsors to offer relief, the Central American isthmus emerged as one of the most significant outposts of Garveyism in the world.

As post-war discontent mounted among the West Indian workers, the UNIA saw the opportunity of a propitious moment and began to make its first appearance in Central America. The West Indians of the region were seething with discontent because, by the end of the WWI they were a class and race conscious proletariat with limited prospects for a secure future. The post-war crisis provided fertile ground for the cultivation of a sense of pride among an embattled minority. While the war in Europe provided a global context for everyday struggles of West Indians in the region, the window on the plight of people of African descent was opened by the *Negro World,* which began publication in 1918.[17] Garveyism was seen by West Indians as an opportunity to organize in their common interest, but the idea of solidarity among people of Afri-

can descent was also seen as a challenge to those who benefited from maintaining the status quo.

Concern over Garveyism stemmed from the rapid spread of his influence in the region combined with the climate of labour and social unrest that existed at the time. In earlier times companies like United Fruit were successful in containing trouble in individual enclaves, but, with the creation of links through an international organization like the UNIA, labour unrest could no longer be contained to one farm, one division or even one country. Garveyism, therefore, presented employers and governments in the region with the threat of mass organization among West Indian workers. In this regard the *Negro World* was the vehicle of communication that connected British West Indians in Central America to one another. Although local West Indian newspapers like the *Central American Express*, the *Panama Star Herald* and several others, carried news of events in communities along the Atlantic coast of the isthmus, only the *Negro World* was independent of local advertisers and provided a global context to the lives lived by the men and women of the region. Consequently, the managers of the U.S. corporations, along with British authorities and the governments of the region, attempted to block the spread of the UNIA and the *Negro World*, the organization's main source of communication with the West Indians. One of the best examples of the efforts to suppress and control the UNIA in Central America is the case of the United Fruit Company.

The arrival of the UNIA initially concerned the UFC because the corporation was unsure of the nature of the organization and its aims among workers on the banana plantations. As a preventative measure company managers drew up a profile of Garvey gleaned from information on his stay in the region in 1910. Subsequently, in order to engage the assistance of the U.S. government, the fruit company sent the State Department a letter based on the information gathered in Limón. In the letter Garvey was described as a "typical noisy Jamaican," who, if allowed to continue his crusade, might replicate the "French experience in Haiti" (Martin 1976: 98). The informa-

tion about Garvey was sketchy and merely indicated that he was a known troublemaker (Chittenden 1919).[18]

A far better source of information about Garvey and the UNIA was the *Negro World* which could be found circulating among company employees in Costa Rica and Panama. According to company correspondence, in 1919 recent issues of the paper were transported from one division to the other on a UFC launch and managers were determined to put a halt to its distribution in the region (Assistant Superintendent, Estrella 1919). The company blamed the *Negro World* and the *Central American Express*, a newspaper published in Bocas del Toro, Panama, for creating labour problems on the plantations. Consequently, the company lawyer in Panama was directed to contact the government in Panama City about the issue of subversive newspapers and to pursue legal means to prevent the distribution of such material (McFarland 1919a). Similarly, a company representative in Costa Rica contacted officials in San José to get the government to prohibit the distribution of the *Negro World*. Company representatives thought that the circulation of the *Negro World* had to be prevented because Panama and Costa Rica would soon have labour trouble "in comparison to which those in the States have been enjoyable picnics" (McFarland 1919b).

In addition to approaching the Panamanian and Costa Rican governments, United Fruit also enlisted the local British authorities, several of whom worked for the company, in an effort to obtain more information about Marcus Garvey and help eliminate the perceived threat posed by the *Negro World* (Chittenden 1919a).

The British Vice Consul in Limón, Fred Gordon, was more than willing to help suppress the newspaper because he considered it to be "decidedly seditious in character and of a nature to foment trouble among British Jamaican subjects" in the region (U.S. Consul 1919). At the same time the British government was moving to ban the *Negro World* in its Caribbean colonies and the British Consul in San José contacted the Costa Rican government about the publication. Subsequently, Costa Rican president, Francisco Aguilar Barquero,

ordered the post office to hold all copies of the paper and government authorities seized the organization's charter and constitution, which were sent from New York. The Costa Ricans continued their assault on the *Negro World* by requesting that the New York post office prohibit the mailing of the newspaper to the country. Clearly, the UNIA was thought to be a threat to more than just the fruit company and people of African descent were considered by Hispanic authorities to be particularly volatile.

In part, the heightened concern of the government in San José was based on the Governor of Limón's perception of the *Negro World* as "Bolshevik and of a nature to cause revolution or race riots in Costa Rica." (U.S. Consul 1919). The Governor was well aware of the conditions of life in Limón for the British West Indian sojourners and he sympathized with United Fruit's fears of revolt. The concern over the possibility of an explosion of racial hatred in Limón was also stated by the Minister of the Interior who referred to the *Negro World* as "Puro Dinamita" (HKF 1919). The "Negro problem," or the challenge posed by thousands of West Indians living in the country, was considered a time bomb waiting to go off and extraordinary efforts were taken to prevent an explosion that might not be contained in the Province of Limón.[19]

G. P. Chittenden, the company manager in Costa Rica, also asked the government to pass a decree regulating the importation of "this class of propaganda." Chittenden emphasized the type of articles that were carried in the *Negro World* because they touched on issues of race and class, the two main pillars of U.S. corporate labour strategy in Central America. The company and government understood that the political awakening of the West Indian population would not be in their interests. There was so much concern that Chittenden asked his men in Limón to get someone from the West Indian community to sign a statement against Garvey in order to prevent his return to the country, but no one was found who was willing to complain about the man who led the UNIA (Unknown Manager 1919). Garvey may have had problems when he was in Limón in 1910, but by 1919 his criticism of the situation

confronted by people of African descent were accepted by the majority of the West Indians in the region and the struggles of the UNIA were becoming common cause.

The worst fears of the corporate managers on the isthmus were realized in December 1919 when United Fruit intercepted a telegram from Marcus Garvey to a contact in Bocas del Toro. The telegram added a new dimension to the organization's activities in the region because it announced the arrival of a UNIA delegation of international organizers. A.W. Williams of Bocas was asked to organize a "big meeting" for representatives of the Black Star Line, a UNIA corporate venture. A few weeks later the British authorities informed United Fruit of the impending visit of Henrietta Vinton Davis and Cyril Henry in Bocas del Toro and Limón. The international organizers were on the maiden voyage of the *Frederick Douglass*, the flagship of the Black Star Line and a symbol of economic independence. The United Fruit manager in Bocas, H.S. Blair, hoped that he could block the UNIA representatives from coming up from Colón, Panama. He approached the Panamanian government with a request that the UNIA representatives be denied entry into the country, but Blair did not get the support he wanted and decided that it was "useless to oppose them." (Blair 1919). United Fruit then developed a new strategy, which was to display a "neutral and friendly attitude," and hope for the best (Blair 1919).

The focus of the UNIA on Central America in its early efforts to develop into an international organization is significant because it reflects the orientation of many in the leadership. The direct experience of Marcus Garvey and some of his closest associates in Central America informed UNIA decisions on the region. The leaders knew that conditions in the region were deplorable and that there were men and women who would be receptive to an organization like the UNIA. Moreover, despite a declining economy in the region, the UNIA could count on finding workers who had some discretionary income. Plantation workers endured greater hardships than their counterparts elsewhere, but they were also paid slightly higher wages and had fewer opportunities to spend or invest their earnings.

Many had also been saving for years for the day they would be able to return to their island homes. Therefore, Central America stood out as an opportunity for the UNIA to expand beyond its U.S. base.

As the date of arrival grew near United Fruit officials began to realize that the UNIA was less of a threat than they had originally imagined. Reports from the company manager in the Canal Zone indicated that "from all accounts their sole purpose on the isthmus [was] to further the sale of stock of the Black Star Line." The UNIA was interested in selling stock to the West Indian labourers and was, according to a United Fruit manager, more interested in "encouraging the goose to lay golden eggs, rather than advocating a strike, which would decrease the purchasing power of the Jamaicans" (Chittenden 1919b). Therefore, the company allowed the UNIA representatives unrestricted access to the workers of the region. Although no account is available of the amount of money generated on the first visit by Black Star Line representatives, the fact that they returned within a few months indicates that the UNIA saw potential in the region.

Henrietta Davis received the same exuberant welcome from British West Indian workers when she returned for a second visit, in early 1920. This time United Fruit saw the opportunity afforded by UNIA fundraising and decided to facilitate the sale of stocks in the Black Star Line by providing trains at "a little more than cost" for people to travel to Almirante, Panama for mass rallies (Blair 1920).

The fruit company also declared a holiday for its employees because it knew that it lose them for the day anyway. Their reasoning for facilitating the sale of stock by the UNIA was twofold. On the one hand, managers believed that "the more rope [the UNIA representatives] are given the sooner they will hang themselves." On the other hand, an expensive lesson for West Indian employees would benefit the company because the "dupes who [bought] shares [would] be the losers." Managers knew that workers who spent their savings or incurred debts to support the UNIA would be forced to return to the job (Blair 1920).

Management's attitude toward UNIA fund-raising was reflective of the company's strategy of keeping workers in debt in order to keep them working. According to a 1925 United States consular report the fruit company extended credit to workers in order to "hold the man on the job" (Meily 1925). According to Consul John James Meily, the majority of farm labourers were "continuously slightly" indebted to United Fruit. Moreover, the company combined the credit system with the "ever present threat of blacklisting" to "stabilize" the labour force and to "prevent promiscuous migration from farm to farm" (Meily 1925). Banana production required a reliable workforce and United Fruit was not opposed to using coercive means to achieve its goals.

These efforts paid off because "the UNIA agents signed up hundreds of new members" that day and the general concerns of United Fruit Company managers were satisfied that the UNIA organizers did not inflame the labour situation because they were mainly interested in selling shares in the Black Star Line. (Mulzac 1963: 82) Company managers considered the selling of shares to workers by the UNIA as an expensive lesson for the West Indians. The United Fruit Company chose cooperation over confrontation in order to manage the threat posed by the UNIA and it appeared to pay off.

In the year after the second visit the UNIA's financial schemes, as predicted by the fruit company managers, began to fall apart. Many West Indians in Central America who bought shares in the Black Star Line grew concerned about the security of their investment, but the organization continued to enjoy a high level of support. Mounting unemployment among West Indians in the region also reduced their purchasing power, but the UNIA continued to focus its international efforts on them because by this time support and revenue in the United States were declining rapidly and money from elsewhere was needed to keep the organization afloat. In order to boast support in Central America during a time of mounting crisis in the United States, Marcus Garvey undertook a fund-raising tour of Limón and Bocas del Toro in early 1921.

According to Judith Stein (1991: 143), during Marcus Garvey's visit to Costa Rica and Panama, he was intent on resurrecting UNIA businesses, and, therefore, "distanced himself from popular militance." Consequently, Garvey sought the co-operation of the fruit company in order to facilitate his organizational efforts. In a letter to his counterpart in Almirante, the manager in Limón wrote that the local leaders of the UNIA had agreed to arrange Garvey's meetings "so as not to interfere with fruit cutting or loadings" (Chittenden 1921a). The UNIA was all too willing to work with United Fruit because, according to one U.S. government source, Marcus Garvey received $2,000.00 per month from Minor Cooper Keith, one of the company's founders (Unknown author 1921).

The payoff by United Fruit was just a part of doing business because thousands of British West Indians worked for the company throughout the Caribbean and someone like Garvey could cause an enormous amount of trouble. Therefore, in addition to monthly payments to the parent organization, United Fruit also arranged for a "special pay-day" to coincide with Garvey's return to Limón.

As the date of arrival in Costa Rica approached it also became necessary for the head of the UNIA to change his travel plans to accommodate the fruit company's production schedule. Marcus Garvey was induced to spend a full three days in San José because the company needed to load two banana boats that were en route to the port in Limón. The UNIA and Garvey understood the importance of timing in banana cultivation and, therefore, knew the value of an arrangement that would not disrupt production. As a result, the West Indians on the plantations were not forced to choose between the Garvey and the company. Upon his return to the United States Garvey defended his actions by stating that he accepted the arrangement because he went to Costa Rica "for the purpose of doing business" (Garvey 1921). Marcus Garvey understood that in business as well as organization compromise is often necessary in order to succeed.

Marcus Garvey can also be seen to have taken advantage of the opportunity presented by United Fruit's dependence on

its West Indian workforce. By demonstrating his willingness to work with the company and not interfere in the banana business, Garvey was able to increase his profile by meeting with some very important people in San José. A special train was ordered from the Northern Railway and Garvey was allowed to occupy coaches previously reserved for white passengers only. Garvey considered his trip to San José to be a step forward for people of African descent in Costa Rica. In San José, away from the attention generated among West Indians on the coast by Garvey's visit, the superintendent of the company's operations had a chance to size up the leader of the UNIA. G.P. Chittenden also arranged for Garvey to meet president of Costa Rica, Julio Acosta. Both the President of the Republic and the manager of the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica were given an opportunity to assess the man known as the "Provisional President of Africa." The result of the meetings was that both men decided that Garvey did not represent a serious threat to the country or United Fruit interests. After the visit Chittenden wrote to Blair in Panama telling him not to worry because, like them, Garvey "too is an employer of labor, understands our position, is against labor unions, and is using his best endeavour to get the Negro race to work." Chittenden also advised Blair that "if you play up to his vanity a little, and talk to him the way you talk to one of your own laborers with whom you were on extra good terms, you will have no trouble with him" (Chittenden 1922).

The United Fruit Company's efforts to deal with Garvey paid off because the activist's subsequent speeches to workers in Limón were favourable to company interests. When Garvey returned to Limón, after the cutting and loading of the bananas for the ships in port had been completed, he told the West Indian audience that "they should not fight the United Fruit Company," because it "meant their bread and butter" (Hill 1984: 536). Clearly, Garvey and the fruit company understood each other's position with respect to the plantation workers. The company needed a reliable workforce to ensure the timely processing of the banana crop and Marcus Garvey

needed the financial support of his followers in order to press forward with the aims of the UNIA.

Marcus Garvey's reception by United Fruit Company officials and the Costa Rican president generated support for his organization because the West Indian community of Costa Rica was pleased to have him represent their interests in San José. According to the San José press, "nearly 10,000" people showed up to hear him speak in Limón (*Diario de Costa Rica* 1921). They showed their enthusiasm by buying shares in UNIA enterprises and Garvey "might easily" have collected "as much as $50,000, all of which he took away with him in cash." (Chittenden 1922). At one meeting he collected "two scrap baskets and one suit case full of United States gold notes," and at another, "he stood beside a pile of gold notes which reached above his knees" (Chittenden 1922). Garvey also reported that his assistant was "occupied all day and all night writing out shares in the Black Star Line and selling bonds of the Liberian Construction Loan" (Garvey 1921) United States Consular reports also indicate that after his visit, United Fruit Company employees continued to send about $2,000 a month to Garvey (Cited in Cronon 1969: 88).

Marcus Garvey enjoyed general support among workers in Limón, but there were those who rallied against him and his organization. During his visit, the Federación de Trabajadores sought to take advantage of the large crowds and "endeavoured to start a counter-attraction" (Chittenden 1921b).

The Federación was a San José based union that sought to organize the banana workers and the UNIA, with its emphasis on race, was an obstacle to organization along class lines. The union came to Limón with the Hispanic workers who began to arrive in significant numbers during the banana boom of the 1910s. The hostility that existed between Hispanics and British West Indians was always palpable and the Federación could not overcome the divisions. The UNIA was not the only source of the Federación's difficulties in recruiting West Indians, but it was an easy target.

In addition to the efforts by the Federación to draw attention away from the UNIA, Garvey was also heckled by some

members of the British West Indian community who demanded that he provide financial statements for his various enterprises (Chittenden 1921b). According to a U.S. military intelligence report, the "better class of Negroes, including doctors, lawyers, clerks, etc., would have nothing to do with Garvey" and attempted to persuade others to ignore him (Hill 1984: 391). Garvey persevered and was able to ignore the efforts of the Federación and criticism leveled at him by a minority of West Indians because the majority of the community in Limón supported his efforts. When the charismatic Jamaican made a public address, thousands of people turned out to hear and support the leader of the UNIA.

> The people came down from all sections by the thousands; they were inside the coaches, they hung outside of the coaches at the doors and windows, and they sat on top of the coaches; the coaches could not hold them; they did not have enough coaches to bring them down from the different parts of the line to Port Limón (Garvey 1921).

United Fruit managers also thought that his speeches would be favourable to business and they were "very well satisfied with the results of the visit" (Chittenden 1921). There was no talk of strike action or agitation for wage increases and improved conditions. The company was so pleased with his performance in Limón that it facilitated his trip to Bocas del Toro by providing him with transportation (Chittenden 1921).

However, the West Indians of Bocas del Toro and Almirante were much less welcoming of Garvey and more adamant about obtaining information concerning the Black Star Line Corporation. Bocas and Almirante were the first communities in Central America to support the UNIA with investment in the Black Star Line and West Indians were reluctant to show support for Garvey until they received answers to their questions about his organization's financial situation. Upon Garvey's arrival in Almirante only a small crowd assembled to greet him and, as in Costa Rica, he was shunned by what the fruit company considered to be "influential and representative Negroes" (Chittenden 1921). Garvey responded by passing through the

small crowd "as though treating every one with contempt" (Informant 1921). While in Panama Garvey also refused to discuss the Black Star Line, choosing instead to focus on Africa and its glorious future (Blair 1921). As a consequence, his audience was hostile with some people yelling at him and others calling him a "damn thief" (Informant 1921). Many people also balked at Garvey's insistence that they pay up to 75 percent more than expected in U.S. gold currency to hear him speak (Informant 1921). Garvey finally answered the crowd by saying:

> I cannot come all the way from New York to speak to you for 50 cents. You are a bunch of ignorant and impertinent Negroes. No wonder you are where you are, and for my part you can stay where you are (Informant 1921).

Although he did manage to sell some shares to people in Almirante and Bocas, Garvey's efforts "did not meet with the degree of success which he expected." (Randolph 1921). Clearly, the Black Star Line was in trouble and everyone including Garvey knew it.

Marcus Garvey's organizational efforts in Panama were also undermined by growing social and economic crisis faced by West Indians living in the country. Between the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914 and Garvey's visit in 1921, three out of four West Indians had lost their jobs in the Canal Zone. Then, when Panamanians realized that 40,000 to 50,000 were intent on staying in the country, the government passed a series of laws that restricted the immigration and naturalization of West Indians (Conniff 1985: 45-52) Panamanian officials considered West Indians to be a "problem" and, according to a summary of the labour situation of the period, United Fruit was more "ruthless and reactionary in Panama than elsewhere" (Meily 1925). Therefore, the backdrop for Garvey's tour of the border communities was somewhat different than in neighbouring Costa Rica where heightened restrictions on West Indian immigration and settlement did not appear until the 1930s and where increased tension caused by extremely high

levels of unemployment were also several years away (Harpelle 1993).

Marcus Garvey's efforts to increase support for the UNIA in Central America also included extending the organization's influence into Nicaragua. The UNIA spread to Nicaragua from Costa Rica in 1922 and immediately became a cause for concern among the Moravian missionaries who worked there. For the Moravian church the mounting influence of the UNIA among people of African descent threatened its future because the organization's representatives encouraged hostility against all white persons, even "against ministers." The success of the UNIA in attracting support among the West Indians of Nicaragua was made evident on 31 August 1922 when one thousand people turned out to march through the streets of Bluefields to commemorate the "Negro National Holiday." However, in a reflection of the divisions existing within West Indian communities everywhere, the UNIA in Nicaragua was also split along class and colour lines. The "Creole élite" met in one location while the "poorer and darker Negroes" met at another, and collaboration between the two groups was not always possible.[20]

Similar enthusiasm for the UNIA could also be found in Honduras where the organization was most active in Trujillo, La Ceiba and Tela, the main centres of the banana industry. The most enduring Garveyite in the country, Eurastus Thorpe of Tela, was a Jamaican-born pharmacist, the Division President and Commissioner and the teacher at the UNIA school. Thorpe stands out as a dedicated Garveyite who saw himself as a soldier in the "fight for Negro liberty." The UNIA in Honduras, as elsewhere in the region, reflected the class divisions within the British West Indian community and Eurastus Thorpe was an outspoken critic of people he considered to be the enemies of his race.[21]

The best example of Thorpe's activism is contained in a letter he wrote the *Negro World* (1921) describing the first UNIA funeral in Honduras. In his letter he described how the event was a challenge to the Anglican church and to "a certain class of Negroes in this locality who were highly offended because they believe so much in the supremacy of the white man."

Thorpe's experience in Honduras, like Garvey's in Costa Rica and Panama, pitted him against a self-styled West Indian élite who he referred to as the "big Negroes." These were people who took solace in their faith and their "British" heritage and distanced themselves from the radicalism of the UNIA and Eurastus Thorpe. Conditions in Honduras at the time of the rise of the UNIA were among the worst in the region. The north coast, where the banana industry was concentrated, was generally lawless and West Indians were defenceless.[22]

Nevertheless, in the early 1920s many West Indians living in Honduras could still deny the violence and racism that surrounded them and Thorpe stood out as a defender of people of African descent.

In Honduras, as elsewhere in Central America, concern over the UNIA and officials worried about the possibility of a race war. According to William P. Garrety, the U.S. Consul at La Ceiba, in 1920 the UNIA held regular meetings in Honduras "at which violent speeches were made against the whites." The speeches were in reaction to the general condition of people of African descent in Honduras and the Consul blamed the UNIA for increasing the tension that existed between Hondurans and the "Negroes." Garrety feared a civil war in Honduras and worried that it might give rise to a "negro uprising" (Garrety 1920). No uprising occurred in 1920, but the tension that characterized relations between British West Indians and Hispanics could be found throughout the region and the UNIA was a ubiquitous presence.

All along the coast, stretching from the neighbouring banana plantations in Guatemala to Nicaragua existed as a series of branches of the UNIA. British West Indian sojourners gathered in the Liberty Halls of the region and relied on the organization as a support network as they passed through the region.[23] As an organization the UNIA had a presence in every West Indian community that ringed the Western Caribbean mainland and support remained strong into the late 1920s and 1930s.

Marcus Garvey's mounting financial and legal problems in the United States challenged his supporters in Central

America. While many people left the organization, others continued to support the UNIA and Marcus Garvey. For example, in 1925 a group of West Indians living in Nicaragua sent a petition to President Coolidge demanding Marcus Garvey's release from prison. Similarly, in Costa Rica and Panama the UNIA remained active throughout the 1920s. According to a 1925 report by the U.S. Consul in Limón, class consciousness among West Indians was growing and the activities of the UNIA and the ACL were "fostering [a] restive spirit." Much to the Consul's relief, at the time the leaders of the UNIA in Limón were considered to be "men of little ability or force of character." However, the Consul warned that should strong leadership be found it was "probable that the organization of the 'Colored' labor of the district could be accomplished with great rapidity and once concerted action seemed possible serious trouble could be confidently looked for." The Consul's report reveals that although the UNIA continued to struggle to sustain support in Limón, the organization continued to threaten the status quo on the banana plantations (Meily, U.S. Consul 1925).

The reason for the UNIA's resilience in Central America at a time when the organization was disappearing elsewhere was that it continued to link local issues to an international struggle. In this way the UNIA cut across the religious, ethnic and class lines that divided the British West Indians of the region and bridged the gaps existing between the string of isolated coastal communities in the Hispanic republics that ringed the Western Caribbean. The UNIA existed as the only non-secular organization of its time that instilled racial pride among the West Indians of Central America. As such, the UNIA was one of the only counterpoints to rising nationalism and the subsequent backlash against foreign domination. Governments of the region were pressured to reign in the multinationals by imposing higher rates of taxation and ensuring employment for nationals. British West Indians, foreign workers who were seen as an appendage to foreign corporations, came under increased scrutiny and were pressed to either assimilate or emigrate.

Despite the growing need for an international presence like the UNIA in the scattered British West Indian communities of the region, the very source of the organization's strength in the region was also the main obstacle to its success. The social divisions that arrived with the Caribbean migrants challenged Marcus Garvey in 1910 and continued to prevent people from taking unified action in defence of the West Indian presence. Throughout the region the UNIA reflected the class and social interests of different factions within each community. As the only organization that was capable of rising above the rivalries inherent in a Pan-Caribbean context, the UNIA was the object of desire among those who vied for power and status at the local level. Consequently, the leadership crisis that engulfed the UNIA in the United States after Marcus Garvey's imprisonment also played itself out on the Central American isthmus.

The issues that divided British West Indians along class lines rose to the surface in the late 1920s and 1930s when employment opportunities evaporated in Central America. The UNIA, the only organization that stood a chance of bridging the internal divisions of class and island rivalries, became the object of desire among those who vied for the attention of West Indians. Marcus Garvey's release from jail did not provide a new stimulus for the UNIA and by the time the 1929 convention was held, the organization was deeply divided in Central America. As elsewhere, the UNIA in the region was a pale reflection of its former self and those who remained loyal to the ideals of the organization were divided into two factions engaged in a struggle for control. Local issues, personal animosities, class, colour, ethnicity and politics engulfed the UNIA and the grander issues of "Negro Improvement" were lost in the melee.

Throughout the region the UNIA declined in importance during the 1930s when economic hardship combined with heightened reaction against the presence of foreigners in the Hispanic republics to lessen the ties that bound British West Indians together. The children of the West Indian sojourners became first generation to integrate into Hispanic society be-

cause their options were limited by their uncertain nationality, the economic crisis of the time and their attachments to the communities they were raised in. In contrast, their parents, who were British subjects, often chose to leave the region, either returning to Caribbean island homes or setting sail for countries like the United States and Canada. Thousands of British West Indians also remained in the region where family and economic ties anchored them to the Hispanic republics. The UNIA continued to play a role in some people's lives, but the immediate struggles of impoverished British West Indians on the isthmus focused their attention on the local, rather than on international issues.

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Notes

[1] In this context Hispanic refers to all Spanish speaking non-British West Indians regardless of skin colour, social class or racial identity. For the most part, the surnames associated with the UNIA on the Central American isthmus are Anglo-Saxon suggesting that the vast majority of members were of British West Indian descent.

[2] The literature on the West Indian diaspora to Central America is uneven, but a few significant studies have been produced. See for example the works of Michael Conniff (1985); Philippe Bourgois (1989), Aviva Chomsky (1996), and Ronald Harpelle (2001).

[3] For a discussion of the development of a labour pool in the region, see Craton (1997).

[4] For one account of an incident between Hispanics and West Indians see Paul Dosal's account of the murder of the Jamaican, Mr. Esson (Dosal 1993: 119). Documentation on abuses committed against West Indians by Hispanic authorities in Central America abounds in the Public Record Office in London.

[5] A distinction is made between assimilation and integration. The West Indians who made their way to Central America did not assimilate, they integrated into Hispanic society. The offspring of West Indian immigrants could and did assimilate when conditions were right. As long as people were isolated from the mainstream by geography, religion, language and class, they tended not to assimilate and, at best, became integrated members of the societies in which they lived. Many people remained on the margins and retained a British West Indian immigrant identity, even if they were second or third generation Central Americans.

[6] Slavery was abolished throughout Central America on 17 April 1825, two years after independence was declared.

[7] According to one source, Colombians referred to Panama as their black province. For a discussion of race relations in Panama see Conniff (1985: 10-12).

[8] Although non-British West Indian members were present in the organization, they were a small fraction of the total membership and, like the Creoles of Nicaragua, were separated from their "British" origins by only a few generations. Therefore, many of the members with Spanish or Hispanisized names were the descendants of West Indian migrants who arrived in Central America with the British before 1900. As a consequence, they shared many of the same concerns as recent arrivals from the British West Indies and could find a place with the local UNIA. In Central America the UNIA, like Garvey himself, was more British West Indian than universal.

[9] The determination of the actual number of Caribbean migrants to the region will never be known because official records are either non-existent or incomplete. Also, the banana plantations of corporations like the United Fruit Company often straddled international borders allowing for the unrestricted flow of workers from one country to another. In fact, in the early 1920s United Fruit managers conspired to smuggle 2,000 West Indians into Honduras to get around the country's ban on "black" migration to the country. (United Fruit Company correspondence, [UFC], 04 08 22) Similarly, company managers discussed bringing an equal number into Costa Rica and "turn them loose" a few hundred at a time to keep labour costs down (Enclosure from Mc Adam 1919: 515-516).

[10] An important point to consider is that El Salvador, the only Central American state that does not border on the Atlantic Ocean did not receive many, if any, British West Indian immigrants. As the smallest, most densely populated country in the region, El Salvador did not have to import labour from the West Indies.

[11] As many as 250,000 men and women were attracted by the opportunities offered in the construction of the Panama Railroad (1850-55), on the French attempt to construct a canal (1881-89), on the U.S. completion of the canal (1904-1914) and to work on the plantations on Panama's

Atlantic coast. Family reunification and the refurbishing of the Canal in the 1940s also attracted people from the West Indies to the country. In 1920, six years after the completion of the project, Canal authorities estimated that there were 70,000 West Indians in the country.(*Spirit of the Missions* 1920: 359). The banana enclaves of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala attracted upwards of 150,000 people between approximately 1880 and 1950.

[12] As elsewhere in the Caribbean region, the term "Africanization" reflected concerns over the political empowerment of people of African descent, but in Central America it was also a xenophobic reaction to growing numbers of West Indian immigrants and the potential threat they posed to the self-identity of the host countries.

[13] According to Tony Martin (1976: 369-373), Panama and the Canal Zone had more chapters and divisions of the UNIA than any other country outside the United States and Cuba.

[14] *La Prensa - The Press* published from 1908 to 1917. According to Oliver Marshall, (1996) the newspaper was only published in Spanish between 1911 and 1916. Therefore, Garvey may have worked as a printer rather than a journalist.

[15] An interesting account of life in the Zone during the construction period can be found in Harry A. Franck (1970 [1913]).

[16] For a discussion of the effect of the First World War on the banana industry see the works of Charles Morrow Wilson (1968: 194) and Thomas L. Karnes (1978: 53-69).

[17] The *Negro World* was published in the United States, but it circulated throughout the Caribbean region.

[18] The author would like to thank Philippe Bourgois and Rafael Bolaños for providing copies of the United Fruit Company documents referred to in this article.

[19] The reaction of Costa Rican authorities also reflected the rising fear in some circles of the "Africanization" of the country. No formal restrictions on the movement of people of African descent existed in Costa Rica or anywhere else in Central America at the time, but calls for legislation aimed at West Indians were heard in every capital.

[20] See the *Proceedings of the Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen For the Year Ending November 5th, 1922* (1922), for a description of work among West Indians living in Nicaragua and brief mention of the UNIA.

[21] See the *Negro World* (1922). In this letter Thorpe expresses his concern over the legal proceedings against Marcus Garvey and pledges that the Tela UNIA Branch will support Garvey throughout the ordeal. The author would also like to thank Mr. Rand Garo for his elaboration on Eurastus Thorpe

[22] "The Masica Incident" which occurred in June 1910 stands out as one of the most memorable examples of violence against British West Indians in Honduras. Three West Indian men were attacked by a local mayor, one was killed immediately, another died later and the third was crippled for life. The event developed into an international incident when the British authorities asked for restitution and justice, but the Honduran government refused. The King of Spain was finally asked to mediate between the two countries. Refer to "La Masica Incident" PRO FO 881/10491 and PRO FO 227/38 for details.

[23] As late as 1989 the UNIA in Costa Rica continued to offer assistance to wayward members of the organization who found themselves in the country without means. Informants indicated that occasionally the local Division, one of the few still in existence, was called upon to help "members" who were destitute.