

GUIANA CROSSROADS

[This article, specially written for Labour Monthly was printed in September, 1963]

THE second phase of the counter-revolutionary battle is over. The first phase began last year with the February disturbances which ended up in rioting and looting and a large part of the commercial centre being destroyed by fire. In the smoke of battle, the main issues became clouded. One heard of the Government's sinister intentions, of fears and suspicions, of racial strife. But the basic causes of the struggle were not brought to the forefront.

For some time, deliberate attempts have been made to subvert my Government. Subversion has now given way to open rebellion. Last year the budget, which was largely influenced by the Cambridge economist, Mr. Nicholas Kaldor, was the excuse for the rebellion. This year the excuse was the Labour Relations Bill.

At the very beginning of the 11-week strike I indicated that it was politically inspired. This was corroborated very early by Mr. Burnham, Leader of the Opposition, and later by Mr. Duncan Sandys. Mr. Burnham put it to me that the Labour Relations Bill was not the *causa belli* but the *cases belli*, not the cause of but the occasion for the rebellion.

The Trades Union Congress of British Guiana denied any political motivation. Note, however, that the Commonwealth Commission, which investigated the riots of February, 1962, sparked off by the T.U.C. and the political Opposition, had this to say of the T.U.C.:*

There is very little doubt that, despite the loud protestations of the trade union leaders to the contrary, political affinities and aspirations played a large part in shaping their policy and formulating their programme of offering resistance to the budget and making a determined effort to change the government in office.

It has been proved beyond all doubt that the three most important trade unionists, Mr. Ishmael, Mr. Jackson and Mr. Sankar, were deeply involved in politics . . . The story put forward before us was that the unbending and indeed provocative attitude of the government was the sole reason for the decision to call a general strike, or at any rate for precipitating that decision. We find it difficult to believe this version and we are of the opinion that the facts have been greatly distorted by the trade union leaders for the purpose of placing the responsibility of arousing the workers' hostility upon the government. (Paragraphs 63-4, 124)

The main purpose of these counter-revolutionary activities is to do one or more of three things:

- (i) Suspension of the Constitution;
- (ii) Indefinite delay of independence;
- (iii) Imposition of a constitutional and electoral formula which will bring the Opposition into power.

The Opposition has clearly stated that there shall be 'no independence under Jagan'. Using as an excuse a controversial but necessary budget, it fomented disturbances and riots in February, 1962. These disturbances were subsequently used by the British Government, first, to delay independence talks, and secondly, not to grant independence at all. Talks, which were to be held in May 1962, were postponed until October 1962. Independence was denied in October, 1962, on the flimsy excuse that the Government and the Opposition could not agree; that my Government would not accede to immediate elections under a changed electoral system from the existing first-past-the-post to proportional representation.

Rather than grant independence, the British Government indicated at the conclusion of the talks that should social and economic conditions deteriorate it might have to consider the imposition of a solution. This is now the line, which the Opposition is pursuing: to create enough havoc to give the British Government the excuse to suspend the constitution or impose a solution. This was clearly voiced by the Opposition Press during the strike. As to our so called free press, note that when the T.U.C. call for a general strike closed down the daily newspapers, the T.U.C. immediately ordered the printing workers back to work without even prior consultation with the Printing Workers' Union so that the *Daily Chronicle* and *Evening Post* could continue with their distortions and incitement.

Mr. Duncan Sandys, Secretary of State for the Colonies, on his departure after a four-day visit, proclaimed that the greatest problem in British Guiana was racial conflict. But what Mr. Sandys and others must note is that the spread of the disorders to the countryside and the racial conflict which ensued was due principally to the fact that Georgetown, predominantly Negro, was not pacified and Indians who were publicly battered and bludgeoned lost faith in the law-enforcing agencies and retaliated. Under the banner of passive resistance the Opposition squatted around government buildings and around government offices, riotously assembled in thousands in open breach of a proclamation prohibiting the assembly of more than five persons, looted stores, intimidated those who remained at work, particularly government employees, and brutally beat up government supporters, particularly Indians. Had the disorders been contained at the beginning and Georgetown pacified, there is absolutely no doubt that the racial conflict which subsequently occurred would have been prevented.

Race is merely superficial and skin-deep. Commenting on the question of race, the Commonwealth Commission said of the disturbances of February 1962:

We found little evidence of any racial segregation in the social life of the country and in Georgetown. East Indians and Africans seemed to mix and associate with one another on terms of the greatest cordiality, though it was clear that the recent disturbances and the racial twist given to them by some of the unprincipled and self-seeking politicians had introduced slight, but it is hoped, transient over-tones of doubt and reserve. Among the inhabitants of Georgetown there is, of course, always present the danger that hostile and anti-racial sentiments may be aroused by a clash of the hopes and ambitions of rival politicians. We draw attention to this possibility because there have been indications of such friction in the past, although, as will appear in the course of this report, the disturbances of February 16th did not originate in a racial conflict, nor did they develop into a trial of strength between the East Indians and the Africans.

. . . we are merely drawing attention to the circumstances mentioned above in order to show that there is no clear-cut division between the races and that although, broadly speaking, Dr. Jagan's supporters are for the most part East Indians and the supporters of PNC are drawn mostly from the African races, the difference is not really racial, but economic and vocational. (Paragraphs 28, 50.)

Race has never been a serious problem in Guiana. Indians and Africans have for many, many years played, worked and lived amicably together. Underlying the superficiality of racialism is the basic problem of the class struggle and the struggle for land and jobs. Prior to the 1955 split in the People's Progressive Party, the Africans and Indians, who constitute the backbone of the working class and peasantry, were united in their struggles against the capitalists and landlords. On every front - sugar plantations, water front, mines, mills, quarries - the workers battled for improved wages and working conditions. Since 1953, however, this militancy has

been dulled. And this is due principally to the 'terror' rule which followed the 1953 suspension of the Constitution, the 1955 Burnham-engineered split in the PPP and the subsequent alliance of Mr. Burnham and his working class supporters with those reactionary elements who were opposed to the PPP before the 1953 suspension.

The Indians support the PPP mainly because of its socialist beliefs and objectives and because it has always led their struggles against landlords, mostly Indian and sugar plantation capitalists. But the PPP's support does not come only from Indians. Because it is the most advanced party ideologically, it attracts the more politically conscious, particularly the youth, students and intellectuals of all races. This accounts for the notable shift of young Africans towards the PPP, and consequently for the racist (Negro as opposed to Indian) appeal of the People's National Congress. This has been noted by the Riot Commission and such observers as Professor Peter Newman and Dr. Raymond Smith of the University of the West Indies.

In paragraph 50 of its Report, the Riot Commission said:

The political professions of the PNC were somewhat vague and amorphous. There was a tendency to give a racial tinge to its policy. Mr. Burnham expressed the opinion that it was Dr. Jagan who was responsible for this unfortunate development...

. . . We do not, however, think that there is much substance in the contention of Mr. Burnham and it seems to us that whatever racial differences existed were brought about by political propaganda.

Professor Peter Newman in an article entitled '*Racial Tension in British Guiana*' said:

. . . Not surprisingly, this attention to a unified African front led to a need for a common enemy, a role which was filled by the East Indians. Operating within the restricted social and economic framework that I have discussed, the main animus of the party (PNC) was focused on the racial issue, and even official party pronouncements began to take on a racial tinge. Since the PPP continued to maintain a public image of non-partisanship (although its local support was often less unbiased), many African intellectuals, especially among the younger group, began to feel dissatisfied with the racial policies of the PNC. Except in a few cases, this did not lead them to the PPP, but it did cause them to withhold active participation from the African party; partly as a result, the second rank leadership of the PNC is distinctly less able than the corresponding echelons of Jagan's party.

British Guiana is the acid test of western pronouncements and intentions. The West, particularly U.S., and Great Britain, has always proclaimed its belief in freedom and democracy, in free and fair elections, in constitutionalism and the rule of law. President Kennedy, for example, during his interview with the Editor of *Izvestia* in early 1962, attacked the Communists for subversion and condemned Dr. Fidel Castro for denying freedom and not holding elections. In the same interview he said:

. . . the United States supports the idea that every people should have the right to make a free choice of the kind of Government they want... Mr. Jagan who was recently elected Prime Minister in British Guiana is a Marxist, but the United States doesn't object because that choice was made by honest election, which he won.

But what is the reality?

Dean Rusk, U.S. Secretary of State is reported last July to have urged the Macmillan Government to suspend our Constitution or to hold a referendum on a new system of voting. Simultaneously, U.S. citizens, agencies and institutions - the American Institute for Free Labour Development, the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, the International Congress of Free Trades Unions (I.C.F.T.U.) and its Latin-American Regional Committee (O.R.I.T.)—have been actively

engaged in subversion. Without the funds supplied by these organizations, the strike would have collapsed in a couple of weeks.

British Guiana may well decide whether the road to the future will be peaceful or violent. For many years, long before the advent of Premier Khrushchov, the People's Progressive Party has been advocating the peaceful parliamentary road to socialism. The dilemma of the imperialists is that it advocates constitutionalism but cannot defeat the People's Progressive Party by its own rules at free and fair elections. It remains to be seen what the final outcome will be. Will the British Government, goaded by the United States, change the electoral system merely to defeat the People's Progressive Party? This in effect would be rigging the elections. If this is done in British Guiana, will it be done elsewhere - wherever Communist, socialist and radical parties, either alone or in alliance, are likely to win elections? Does it mean that the capitalists and their allies will permit elections only so long as they can win? If the West is sincere in its pronouncements, it must demonstrate it by granting unconditional independence immediately. Only independence can permit of rapid social and economic progress and the removal of doubts and suspicions of our intentions. What happens in Guiana may very well indicate whether there will be peace in the world.

*report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Disturbances in British Guiana in February 1962 H.M.S.O. *Colonial 354*, October 1962

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2000