

# May Day (1990) Speech at TUC Rally

Comrade Chairman

President Hoyte

Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Brothers and Sisters

I extend to you, comrades, brothers and sisters, warmest fraternal greetings. Today, working people all over the world set aside their differences and join together to reflect on the present and set a course for the future.

Our trade union movement faces May Day 1990 divided. This regrettable fact nearly prevented me from being here today, especially as I was warned that I might be attacked. But neither my resolution to fight has been diminished nor my boldness has been tempered. So here I am with you as we have always stood, uncompromisingly struggling against oppression and for social and economic justice. On this May Day, we re-affirm our unconditional solidarity with the working people of Guyana and assure you that, as in the past, we will remain your solid ally and true friend and brother.

More than a decade ago, I had warned about the anti-national and anti-working class IMF road and its conditionalities - wage freeze, removal of subsidies and price controls, cuts in allocations for social services, and devaluation. I had said it would lead to disaster. And it has.

Successive devaluation have brought our nation to its knees and our people to the brink of desperation and hopelessness.

Relative to 1970, real wages by April 1990 had declined by 272 percent. In view of this, FITUG described the abominable 7% wage increase this year as "not only ridiculous but bordering on an absurdity." And the TUC has said that the 7% pittance is grossly inadequate and can't work, that the minimum wage of less than one US dollar should be at least \$100 Guyana dollars.

The quality of life has seriously deteriorated. Over the past twenty years, living standards have declined an estimated 75%. At present, over 60% of the population live below the poverty line.

Today's minimum wage cannot buy a pound of chicken. Hunger, malnutrition and infant mortality stalk our dear land. Crime, delinquency and prostitution are rampant. Bribery and corruption are endemic. And the brain drain trek has become a flood.

One British journalist who, in the early 1970's had high hopes, recently described Guyana as a "country that is bleeding to death."

We cannot be happy with the fact that our people are maltreated and hounded overseas, wherever they seek to better their fortunes.

These trying times calls not only for national dialogue, but also for abandonment of self interest. Self interest must give way to patriotic commitment.

We must take all the appropriate steps and make the necessary sacrifices to raise the status of our nation and people at least to the No. 2 position in the Caribbean which it attained when I had the honour of being Premier.

Momentous and dramatic changes are sweeping many parts of the world with many positive effects on the lives of working people. Arbitrary rule and command methods are being challenged and are giving way to democratic solutions. In Brazil, Peru, Chile, Haiti, Nicaragua, governments have changed or are in the process of being changed democratically and peacefully. Above all, the wonderful spectacle of Nelson Mandela walking to freedom is an inspiration to all of us who are struggling against injustice.

Guyana cannot remain as the holdout on democracy in this hemisphere. An end must be put to undemocratic methods and arbitrary practices which have led to economic stagnation and a visibly crumbling society with no hope for the future.

We too must join the freedom train, without this, the Economic Recovery Programme will fail. The reason is obvious. It was designed without consultation with the people, who have lost confidence in the government. The people's perception of the ERP is more suffering. And as always, they are absolutely right.

We are frequently challenged about our alternative. It is this. Guyana needs a new beginning. We need a democratic opening like we need a breath of fresh air. We need a respite from stifling incompetence and pervasive corruption eating away at our society. We need to rescue our country.

Guyana needs a democratic system of election with an independent and a respected Elections Commission, an electoral register made up as in 1964 from house-to-house visits by enumerators under the supervision of the Commission and with party scrutineers in attendance, a preliminary count of the votes at the place of poll, a guaranteed right to accompany the ballot boxes to the final counting place and to have them within vision at all times.

Already, we are told that counting of the votes at the place of poll is out of the question. We had always felt that dialogue means all sides placing their concerns on the table and satisfactory and reasonable compromises devised. If industrial unrest and political instability are to be averted these controversial issues must be placed now as the first question on the agenda for dialogue.

The question of new beginning for Guyana is no longer in dispute. It is the national consensus. It is recognized by all Guyanese, of every political persuasion, that is the only way our country can go forward is to have an administration supported by the people.

I am glad to see that the TUC's position in 1978 that there would be no solution to the economic crisis without a political solution has been taken up by others at home and overseas.

Thirty-four prominent Guyanese, headed by the Anglican and Catholic Bishops and including other religious, trade union and business leaders, academics and professionals in an open letter to the President about a year ago, linked economic recovery and development to political and electoral reforms, including a preliminary count of ballots at the places of poll.

The McIntyre Report made it pellucidly clear that the recovery programme will not succeed without political and public support.

The same British journalist who said that the exodus was hemorrhaging Guyana to death pointed out that "decades of electoral fraud have demoralized the country to the point where society is falling apart." Senator Kennedy in the same tone said: "if Guyana is to get its economy back on track, it must first get its democracy back on track."

President George Bush expressed the hope that elections would be free and fair in keeping with the norms of democracy cherished by the American and Guyanese peoples.

And Ms Sally Cowal, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs made the clear linkage between democracy and development when

she said that "economic recovery will be successful when implemented within a process which is democratic. We will continue to say that; we believe that will have an effect."

Elections are not everything, but without them, there is nothing. And they must be certified to be free and fair and free from fear.

With Guyana a member of the Commonwealth and Caricom, the Government in keeping with undertakings given to the BBC and the British Foreign Secretary, must invite the Commonwealth and Caricom to send observers teams to monitor the forthcoming elections. Guyana can do no less than Suriname, St Vincent and Nicaragua to attain international credibility. I urge the Government, which supports hemispheric cooperation and integration, to embrace the tradition of Latin America of a totally independent Electoral Commission, and to follow the example of Nicaragua in inviting observer teams also from the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the Carter Center and the European Parliament, among others. There should be no question of interference if we issue invitations to members of our international family. After all, we are a signatory to the UN Covenant on Political and Civil Rights.

We believe that emerging from any such elections should be a government comprising the major political forces in which all races, classes and ideologies are represented. Our decade-long "winner-will-not-take-all" policy will include our PCD allies and the inclusion as well of the PNC. We feel also that there should be a place in the Cabinet for special interest-business, religion, women, Amerindians. Such a government will have an agreed programme and national appeal and its members will be able to negotiate on Guyana's behalf with heads held high as democratically elected leaders, and not as mendicants begging for aims. With the people behind such a government, internationals would hesitate before foisting unacceptable hardships on our people.

A PPP election victory will not mean that my Party will dominate such a government. This is a time for national unity, not national discord. With this in mind we shall call on patriotic Guyanese whether in Guyana or abroad, who have special skills or experience regardless of their political views or connection, to help in formulating policies for implementation. The theory of "enemies of the state" would have no place in a new Guyana.

There will be no witch hunting or retribution against any person who is or was in the service of the state or any of its agencies because of their political views, affiliations or past or present political activities.

Guyana needs to heal its wounds, not open them further. We have unitedly to demonstrate our intolerance for alienation and underdevelopment, and move forward to solve the pressing problems facing our nation.

My party was, throughout its history and in every major document, stated and re-stated its adherence to democratic principles and periodic free and fair elections.

We believe in a democratic system of government, a free and independent press, respect for human rights, a truly independent judiciary, a creatively functioning Parliament, Independent State Commissions and impartial disciplined forces. In order to entrench a truly democratic environment, a considerable amount of tolerance is needed.

The creation of such a culture is intended to move Guyana forward, not to look backward and be consumed by bitterness and a portioning of blame. There would be no place for undermining of any organization and no intention of destroying anything or anyone. There will be no recrimination about the past rigging of elections. The disciplined forces will be encouraged to play its full role in support of Guyana's independence and sovereignty.

The motive force for Guyana's development will have to come basically from its own people and from policies developed in Guyana by its people in democratic and open debate. No one doubts that we have both the talent and the ingenuity. A new government would ensure minimum civilized conditions for Guyanese citizens such as ensuring an independent and representative trade union movement, the integrity of collective bargaining and decent wages and conditions of work. All efforts will have to be made to get Guyana producing again. This can only happen with a labour movement and workers who see hope ahead and who know that the government is there to protect them and who have reasonable standards at work, at home and in their environment. Guyana must have economic policies suited to its own needs and requirements and not imposed by any outside agency. The Guyanese people must be fully involved in formulating such policies and not be presented with plans and programmes designed in foreign countries.

We see industry as playing a prominent and major role in creating wealth. Every effort will be made to remove the numerous constraints on Guyanese industry and invite them to join in a partnership with the government and people in creating a new and developing country. We will create balanced policies for the development of agriculture, industry, mining and forestry in which Guyanese can play a major and dynamic role by themselves or in partnership with other local and/or foreign investment.

Guyana will need a great deal of foreign assistance in relation to the massive debt burden, our decrepit infrastructure, which is causing so much havoc and losses to our agricultural community will have to be rehabilitated.

Our huge unsustainable foreign debt must be re-negotiated. As I have already said, a new government will be in a better position to re-negotiate because the people behind it will increase production and productivity.

Many people and governments are keenly and anxiously observing developments here. This is not unusual or unnatural. Human rights issues can no longer be contained within national boundaries. With the worldwide democratic sweep, it was to be expected that the cry for freedom of the Guyanese people will receive, sooner or later, a sympathetic international ear. The concerns expressed by foreign governments, organizations and persons do not constitute meddling. They are hearing our pleas, stretching their hands out to us and showing solidarity with our national aspirations for democracy and economic development. But only Guyanese can solve the problems of Guyana. And this is why it is necessary for all of us, whatever our views or status, to make our voices heard for face and fair elections and we must be do now.

Brothers and sisters, the time has come for change. And it is upon us. No one can stop it. But we are not offering change for the sake of change. We are offering an advance from partisan politics to national consensus. We are offering freedom with dignity, we are offering you nothing less than the restoration of our faith in ourselves and our dignity as a fighting people. We are asking for national unity and with it we shall all blaze a trail of glory for Guyana.

Long live May Day

Long live the workers of the world

Long live Guyana.