

TRADE UNIONS AND DESTABILISATION

by

Work to rule; one-day protest strike. This is the action proposed by the Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU), the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union, the National Union of Public Service Employees and the Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers.

The Unions want a 25 per cent increase in wages and salaries from January 1996 and a \$2,000 across-the-board lump sum.

The Unions have as an ally the Leader of the Minority, Hugh Desmond Hoyte. In his New Year Message, he called for substantial increases in salaries and wages some of the trade unions have a long history of collaboration and destabilisation, ever since the Burnham-led split of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) in 1995.

The TUC had supported the PPP during the 1953 elections, when the Party scored an overwhelming victory of 18 out of 24 seats. But following the removal of the PPP government after 133 days in office, the reactionaries took control of the TUC.

TAKEOVER

Referring to the disbanding and reconstruction of the TUC, William H. Knowles in his book Trades Union Movement and Industrial Relations in the BWI, wrote:

"In a move of questionable legality, the anti-Jagan non-Communist elements of the Trades Union Council voted, while supporters of the People's Progressive Party were out of the country, to dissolve the B.G. Trades Union Council.

"Later, after Burnham had split the PPP in 1955, even some of the militant unions and leaders under his influence joined the new right-wing, anti-communist TUC, Andrew Jackson and Brentnol Blackman, who had been attached by the British government became pillars of the new TUC."

How reactionary the TUC had become and what role the U.S. trade union movement was playing in British Guiana could be gleaned from a special report, Facts on Cheddi Jagan and his Communist controlled PPP of British Guiana, Free Labour's 10-Year Struggle to Preserve Independence by Serafino Romualdi. He reported *inter alia*:

“In order to eliminate, to all intents and purposes, the usefulness of the union (MPCA) Mrs Jagan in her role of Minister of Labour, Health and Housing, suggested the establishment of a Wages Council in the sugar industry with statutory powers to fix wages and working conditions.” Romualdi continued:

“The free labour movement bitterly opposed this measure because, once introduced in the sugar industry (with the consequent elimination of the union), it would have eventually been extended to the bauxite mines, the waterfront and other industries [sic]. Rupert Tello termed this Jagan proposal “especially a weapon to destroy the free trade union movement.”

FOREIGN CONTROL

The trade union leaders came under the control of CIA agents and received training in the USA.

In a statement about these trainees made after his visit to Guiana in April 1962, Romualdi said: “. . . it appeared to me that young democratic trade union leaders would need intensive training to combat Dr Jagan's efforts. Subsequently, eight Guianese came to Washington in June 1962, as participants in the Institute's first course. In September of that year, six of these men returned to British Guiana, supported by AIFLD internships, enabling them to put into practice, on a full-time basis, what they had learned at our school . . . When the BGTUC decided to call a general strike in an attempt to put the Institute's six interns, who were working with various local unions, at the disposal of the council's strike committee . . . In agreement with the Institute's Secretary-Treasurer, Joseph A. Beirne, I instructed the interns to fully devote their efforts to supporting the strike and extended their internships, which were scheduled to end on June 15, to

August 15 . . . I would like to say that I am proud of our graduates in British Guiana. In spite of sacrifices and hardships they kept their place in the front lines of a difficult and, unfortunately, sometimes bloody battle.”

Apart from money for training, other financial help was received. Richard Ishmael, in a statement reported in the Guiana Graphic of May 3, 1963, said: “In this connection the local trade union movement received a grant of \$5,000 (BWI) between 1958 and 1961 from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) through its regional branch ORIT and the Caribbean Congress of Labour (CCL). Also received was a grant \$8,500 (BWI) over the period October 1961 to May 1962, from ORIT to assist the local movement in a special organisational crash programme, primarily concerned with the organisation of Clerical Workers following the strike of clerical workers at Sprostons Ltd., for recognition of their trade union.”

But the amounts referred to by Ishmael by no means cover all the financial assistance received by the local trade-union movement from the United States. Ishmael omitted to mention some important facts.

For the year ending December 31, 1961 alone, out of an expenditure of \$15,429 by the TUC, the sum of approximately \$11, 876 was obtained from overseas. In that year, its president general, Egbert Bolton of the National Union of Public Service Employees (NUPSE), was also the general secretary of the United Force.

The first serious clash against the PPP Government was in 1962, when nearly a half of the Georgetown business centre was burnt down. (to be continued).