

Story Of A Fighting Newspaper

The following article was written by Janet Jagan, Editor of *Mirror* and President of the Union of Guyanese Journalists (UGJ) for the Democratic Journalist, periodical of the International Organisation of Journalists (IOJ). The U.G.J. is affiliated to the I.O.J. for many years, and is currently forging stronger links with F.E.L.A.P. (Federation of Latin American Journalists):

Despite all the pressures on the *Mirror*, from its earliest beginnings to the present, the most noteworthy features are that it has survived as a paper and it has never lost its fighting spirit, its basic policy of backing the struggles of the working people and its adherence to truthful and honest coverage of the news. The *Mirror* has been a source of information, guidance and interpretation in understanding both local and international events. At no time has it deviated from its advocacy of the rights of the Guyanese working people. At the same time, it has taken up a good number of ideological issues, exposing anti-communist tricks and subterfuges. It has published facts and figures and information that no other press in Guyana will print.

Mirror began as a small weekly paper. It later became a daily newspaper, with a soaring circulation, also having the traditional enlarged Sunday edition. When the *Mirror* was first introduced in December 1962, the nation had already been through a traumatic period of burning, looting and mass demonstrations organised by Guyana's big businessmen, determined to bring down the democratically elected government of the People's Progressive Party (PPP). These events took place at a time when the government was introducing legislation for higher taxes on big business interests. More was yet to come!

The right-wing press, which included the *Chronicle*, *Argosy* and *Evening Post*, the privately owned radio station and even the Government Information Services were hostile to the government led by the country's first premier, Cheddi Jagan. It might seem surprising that the list includes the Government Information Services (GIS), but the reality was that the government was not permitted control over a number of government sectors, including foreign affairs, finance and the civil service. In the

case of the GIS, the civil servants in charge were just not prepared to support any Left government, and were still under the ideological and cultural influence of the British colonialists. It is worthwhile to mention that some of these very persons are still around, still unable to throw off the last remnants of British cultural domination.

One of the jobs of the **Mirror** at that time was to break through the lies and anti-communist hysteria of the local media and to let the people know what was really going on. Thus the **Mirror** had a very special mission from its very inception: to counter the lies being propagated by the media, owned and controlled by big business interests.

The lies and distortions were many and varied, but all with the same motive of trying to pull down the government. There were attempts to fool public opinion that there were "1,000 Cubans" in Guyana, that "Cuban warships" were outside the coast on the way to Port Georgetown, the capital city, and the thousand and one false stories aimed at destroying public confidence in the government, distorting achievements and creating racial divisions and tensions. All of this was aided and abetted by some clever British administrators, including the Governor and his Commissioner of Police, who connived to wreck the government. It is important to note that they were ably supported by local aspiring politicians and American-AFL-CIO trained trade unionists.

While the **Mirror** was out to print the truth and nail the lies and slander being perpetrated by the capitalist-owned media together with the vile publications of the local reactionary political parties, the CIA-backed opposition was busy employing thugs and hooligans to beat up **Mirror** vendors so as to keep the paper off the streets. The **Mirror**, whose circulation had grown rapidly, was soon "too hot to handle" by some vendors, who feared beatings and other reprisals for selling the paper.

Apart from the battles fought by the **Mirror** in those days, the newspaper had other problems. These were mainly of a technical nature, since it is important to note that the **Mirror** began publication with second-hand equipment which, as time went on, was becoming technologically obsolete.

After the removal of the PPP government in 1964, the new People's National Congress (PNC)-led government sought to prevent any improvements in the **Mirror** by

bringing into force Orders requiring for the first time import licences for printing materials and newsprint. The **Mirror** had applied for, and had been granted, a licence for the importation of a new printing press, but the licence had expired before the firm was ready to ship the equipment. The licence was never renewed by the government.

It became clear that the regime intended to make use of the state-administrative machinery and bureaucratic red-tape to prevent the **Mirror** from importing and obtaining modern printing equipment. But that was not the end of the regime's efforts to harass the **Mirror**. Worse was yet to come. The regime now proceeded to use its bureaucratic machinery to deny the New Guyana Company — printers and publishers of the **Mirror**, — the right to import newsprint. Later, the **Mirror** was to describe this method as MAD — Maximum Administrative Delay. No replies were received to applications for licences to purchase newsprint abroad. Applications were either "mis-laid" or "lost" in the Trade Ministry. Unusual delays in granting licences for importation of newsprint caused the **Mirror** to close down on four separate occasions, once for a full month, another time for three weeks. The size of the daily paper had to be reduced from eight to four pages. Two closures took place on the eve of the 1973 general elections.

The harassment of the **Mirror** was to worsen. In January 1973, the printers and publishers of the **Mirror** filed a motion against the government in relation to the Orders controlling the importation of newsprint and printing equipment. The essence of the motion was that the Orders were calculated to infringe on the freedom of expression as set out in the Constitution of Guyana and that the denial in granting import licences was discriminatory and also a violation of the Constitution. The hearing came up a year later (1974) and took another year (1975) to be heard. A decision was not handed down until May 1976 — one and a half years after the case concluded. The judge struck down the two impugned Orders as being unconstitutional and awarded special damages to the **Mirror**. The judge in his ruling said: "To get a licence for a printing press without obtaining a licence for newsprint is pointless, as I have already indicated, and the same applies in reverse. What it basically amounts to is this: no licence and/or printing press — no freedom of expression.

This clearly to my mind, amounts to newspaper control and not newsprint and/or printing equipment control."

The government appealed against the decision and hearing commenced two years later — 1978. The Appeal Court reversed the decision in favour of the government, and in addition, the **Mirror** was taxed costs to the tune of G\$24,119!

The **Mirror** was not only subjected to adverse court rulings but it was also subjected to repeated libel suits. There were attempts to sabotage the printing press in which acid and sand were thrown into the machine by agent-provocateurs, but the main assault, however, was the ongoing campaign to starve the **Mirror** of newsprint.

Since December 1977, the government has flatly refused to allow the New Guyana Company to import newsprint. It has been forced to purchase on a week-to-week basis from the state-owned Guyana National Newspapers Limited. The printers and publishers of the **Mirror** have been obliged to purchase newsprint at whatever prices and quantity dictated by the state-owned firm. The price during 1982 was about three times the normal prices. As a result, the **Mirror** has had to cease publishing as a daily newspaper and now prints only once per week. Formerly, the Sunday issue was 24 pages, then it was reduced to 16 pages. Now it is only four pages.

These difficulties notwithstanding, the **Mirror** continues to be the most widely read newspaper in Guyana. The name, **Mirror**, is known in almost every home both in the city and countryside, in fact, **Mirror** is virtually a household word.

Like every progressive newspaper circulating under regimes of an undemocratic character, the **Mirror** has to struggle for its survival as well as for its rights as a newspaper. In this endeavour, it relies on the support and solidarity of progressive journalists and other media workers nationally and internationally, but above all, on the active support of its readership, and the progressive and democratic forces in Guyana.