

PARTY LIFE:

The Politics Of Protest

by JANET JAGAN

The People's Progressive Party was the first grouping in Guyana to introduce political struggle to achieve the people's aims. That is not to say there was no form of struggle before the PPP came into being in 1950, because there were many manifestations of mass discontent. These were evident from the time of slavery up to the creation of the first trade union in the then British Guiana. However, organised, coordinated, purposeful struggle began with the advent of the PPP.

In those early days of the fifties, different methods of struggle were first introduced. There were out-door public meetings, something new as mild politiking of the times took place generally in school or church buildings. The PPP started what is common today, public meetings up and down the country, in the interior and riverain areas, anywhere where people lived, with the purpose of keeping them informed and involving them in struggle.

A massive signature campaign in 1950, probably one of Guyana's first, began the call for self-government as the first step to independence. This was circulated far and wide and was very impressive; in fact it brought about the visit of the Waddington Constitution Commission from London, which was set up to make recommendations for a new constitution. Then, when the Commission arrived and was put up at the Park Hotel, a massive PPP picket line was out there, the first perhaps, to demand universal adult suffrage irrespective of literacy, a fully elected legislature, a ministerial system and other advances. The PPP won that round and the most advanced Constitution in the West Indies was written for the first elections under adult suffrage which took place in 1953.

The PPP applied the politics of the written word, in frequent handbills, posters and booklets and in its first paper **Thunder**, which came out monthly and was sold for one penny a copy.

Other forms of struggle developed when the PPP fought its first general elections, won and then was removed from office 4½ months later when the British suspended the Constitution in 1953. The Party inaugurated a civil resistance campaign in which the people violated intentionally, the emergency regulations. Cheddi Jagan was the first; he broke the restrictions orders keeping him to the city of Georgetown and went to jail. Others followed, including the late Ram Karran.

During this form of struggle, other techniques were used to further the several campaigns. When Martin Carter, Sydney King, Rory Westmaas and others were interned at Atkinson Field (now Timehri, but then a US base), postcard petitions were used, demanding that the Governor release them. This was repeated later when a number of members were detained at Mazaruni prison for some two years.

During that period from October 1953 to 1957, different methods of getting over the Party's propaganda had to be used, since most activities were illegal. The Party printed underground handbills and distributed them by underground means.

Political struggle has taken many forms. One has been the withdrawal of labour, massive strikes as an expression of workers' anger or discontent. Marches and rallies have been popular methods of protest through the years, as were the two enormous Freedom Marches for independence in the sixties when demonstrators from the two far ends of the coastal belt — Charity and Crabwood Creek — came to the centre in Georgetown for massive rallies.

The technique of having whistle stop meetings on the long marches, used then, is still an effective means of rallying working people in all the villages.

Witness the two recent PPP marches and rallies for free and fair elections held in Essequibo and Berbice.

There have been many innovations in the politics of protest. The Women's Progressive Organisation held a protest picket line in front of the Parliament Buildings demanding flour, during the period when there was no flour available and the PNC was trying to foist rice flour on the people. The women wore flour bags as dresses during this demonstration. And in another WPO demonstration against the high cost of living, women car-

ried pots and banged them loudly with spoons. And yet again, in another protest the WPO demonstrated in front of the Guyana Electricity Corporation against the high fees and poor services, wearing caps made of electricity bills.

In one of the most innovative PPP protests, the Party demonstrators wore death masks, carried coffins and performed many of the acts of burial in connection with the firm that intended to bring toxic waste to Guyana. The government-sponsored plan was nipped in the bud by this protest.

In Parliament, which forms another aspect of struggle, various techniques have been used to emphasise the degree of anger and disagreement with the ruling party. There have been walk-outs, picketing of parliament, wearing of placards on the chests of PPP parliamentarians in Parliament, and again dealing with the flour shortage, throwing of flour at the government perpetrators of the shortages, to give a few examples. On two occasions, Parliament was boycotted for long periods, once for three years, protesting rigged elections.

The tool of boycott has been used effectively many, many times during the life of the Party. There was a most effective campaign to boycott D'Aguiar's product whose boss Peter D'Aguiar had taken reactionary positions on numerous occasions, including backing the British and supporting the PNC in its destabilisation campaign of the sixties. The "CREEPS" of the sixties were boycotted and felt in their businesses the wrath of the people.

The seawalls and other prominent places have been painted with slogans. In fact, painted slogans have been used effectively in many ways, including on streets and highways.

Slogans on banners, flyers, shirts and dresses even balloons, have expressed people's discontent through the politics of protest. During the seventies, former PPP minister EMG Wilson, to focus on the lack of civil liberties, chained himself to the metal fences surrounding Parliament Buildings. Another member, David Westmaas marched alone on the East Coast, and then stood before Parliament in protest at PNC misrule. There have been songs of protest written for special occasions; there have been poems and stories with the theme of protest.

There have been dramatic presentations on this theme.

There have been vigils outside government house, the prisons, Parliament Buildings and elsewhere; there have been candlelight and torchlight parades; there have been a multitude of ways the Party and the people have used in the hundreds of campaigns to bring about a better life for the Guyanese people.

During the early 1960s when PPP members were in detention, there was a protest campaign centred on "Independence Yes: Celebrations No". For a long time PPP leaders boycotted government functions, cocktail parties, and receptions. In 1973, there was a Civil Resistance campaign launched after the army grabbed the ballot boxes for the first time.

There were also hunger strikes; petitions, statements, exhibitions, conferences and symposia, lectures and squatting.

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OUR CONTRIBUTORS:

- **Clinton Collymore:** PPP Information & Publicity Secretary.
- **Janet Jagan:** PPP Executive Secretary.
- **Donald Ramoutar:** PPP Executive Committee member.
- **Indranie Chandarpal:** PPP Central Committee member and WPO General Secretary.