

PARTY LIFE:

Freedom House

by Janet Jagan

The headquarters of every Party are unique to the character and conditions of the Organisation, its members and the country. Freedom House is no exception. Freedom House is the fifth site of Party Headquarters. At the very beginning, in early 1950, after the founding of the People's Progressive Party, the headquarters, if it could be given that name, were at Comrade Cheddi Jagan's dental office in Charlotte Street, Georgetown. At the time, there was no other place from which to conduct the Party's business. No doubt, because of the proximity, the Auditorium in Charlotte Street also became the venue for larger gatherings of the Party, including its first Congress in 1951.

Some months before the 1953 election, the first real headquarters were established on Regent Street, in the same building, but at street level, where GAWU, the union of sugar workers, now has its headquarters. When the police raids began in 1953, the Party eventually moved to a small totally inadequate office on James Street, Albouystown. From there, sometime in 1954, the headquarters moved to a tiny building on Wellington Street, just around the corner from the present Robb Street building. Here the headquarters remained until the Party purchased the old building, once a Masonic Lodge, at 41, Robb Street, Lacytown, in 1957, and the name of "Freedom House" proposed by the former Party Chairman, Brindley Benn, became known throughout the country.

The name, quite obviously, referred to the freedom struggle then being waged for independence from Britain. The struggle for genuine freedom for all Guyanese is still the highest on the Party's agenda, and thus its name, is still fresh and appropriate.

In the early days, the Party could not afford renovation or even repairs and painting, so for a while it did not have the appearance of a party headquarters. However, in the very early days of a Centre for the Party, arrangements were made to encourage people to come in

for discussions, to bring their problems, to make members, to arrange meetings and so forth.

Through the years the Party acquired land to the east and west of Freedom House so that extensions were made that enlarged the building to accommodate larger offices for its two arms, the youth, **PYO**, and the Women, **WPO**, as well as a larger staff and a much enlarged auditorium and conference room and areas for research, storage, printing, photographic dark room and audio visual equipment.

In the earlier period, a small separate building at the back of Freedom House was used as the headquarters of the PYO, but this was incorporated into the central building during one construction period. Also before the bookshop was established, the bottom flat held the Party printery, where **Thunder**, booklets and handbills were produced. In the sixties, the Progressive Bookshop was established and occupied the bottom part of the building.

The Progressive Bookshop, later renamed the **Michael Forde Bookshop**, has remained an integral part of the Freedom House building, which was partly destroyed when the bomb, placed in the Bookshop by the PNC, went off in 1964, during the period when the CIA was busy destabilising our PPP government, and killed Michael Forde. The whole eastern side of the building was ripped off.

In the last renovation of Freedom House, when the auditorium was greatly extended, the bottom section was also extended to provide a street level auditorium which is used for a variety of purposes, including regular public video shows thrice weekly — one on Monday nights and one at mid-day Wednesday for sports fans and also, for children shows and story telling on Saturday mornings. This area is also used for band practice; for tutoring of high school students each afternoon from Monday to Friday; for domino contests, for fund raising events, for exhibitions and as a dining hall when day-long conferences are held in the Auditorium on the third floor. It is also used as a gathering point for demonstrators before and after events.

The second floor holds the the offices of our Party Secretariat, the administrative offices and those of the Youth and Women. It is here that people come with their Party business, their problems, their requests for repre-

sentation, their complaints against the government, and students come for information and data. Journalists come for interviews and news and guests arrive from all parts of the country, the region and the world. All day long there is movement at Freedom House, party activists and organisers coming and going, conferences or discussions taking place, telephone calls, letters and documents being typed, delegations being arranged, mimeographing and photocopying being carried out, etc.

The human factor, of aged, ill and destitute Guyanese seeking help is a regular feature, and, perhaps, typical of the kind of headquarters Freedom House has always been, where people seeking help, guidance and representation turn to, in their time of misery or in their anger and frustration over injustice.

On the western side of Freedom House, the land area has been used as a place to store Party vehicles and to wash and repair them. An old building, part of a larger one that existed when the lot was purchased many years ago, has been converted into a cottage to house guests, mainly from the Caribbean, who visit the Party from time to time, or delegates who come to Party conferences. It has been converted into comfortable and well furnished living quarters.

The Auditorium now has many functions which include conferences, receptions and various activities of the Youth and Women's arms as well as cultural shows. Impressive conferences and seminars have been held there including historic occasions like the 40th Anniversary of the Political Affairs Committee, or solidarity meetings for Nicaragua and Haiti.

Freedom House is the centre from which the Party stretches out across the nation to achieve its goals of freedom and social progress for the Guyanese people.