

PAC's Sterling Contributions

(A revised version of an article published in Thunder in 1996 by Janet Jagan)

Sixty years ago this year, the Political Affairs Committee was founded. The Political Affairs Committee (PAC) was the forerunner of the People's Progressive Party, setting out in its first declaration of aims, in the first publication of its Bulletin on November 6, 1946, that its purpose was "to assist the growth and development of the labour and progressive movements of British Guiana, to the end of establishing a strong, disciplined and enlightened Party, equipped with the theory of Socialism".

Its other aims were to "provide information, and to present scientific political analyses on current affairs, both local and international and to foster and assist discussion groups, through the circulation of bulletins, booklets and other printed matter."

In this year which celebrated the 40th anniversary of Guyana's independence, it is fitting to refer to the PAC, which 60 years ago, set in stream all the factors which were to lead to the formation of the PPP, and thus the beginning of the struggle for independence in the then crown colony of British Guiana.

Without the foresight of the four who considered the need for the PAC and a political party equipped with the theory of socialism, the independence struggle might have been delayed for some years. Instead, it began in 1950, when the newly formed People's Progressive Party made the first-ever declaration that its intention was to win a "free and independent Guiana."

Three important aspects of the formation of the PAC need to be examined. These are the time frame in which it emerged, the background and qualities of the four founders and lastly, the emphasis on socialism made by the founders at a time when socialism was barely known locally.

The year 1946 when the PAC was founded was the year after the end of World War II and the defeat of Hitlerite fascism and one year before India's independence was achieved. These were important influences, for the heroism of the millions of people opposing the march of Hitler's forces through Europe, the Anti-Hitler Coalition on a large scale which led to Hitler's defeat, the remarkable endurance and spirit of all those who fought fascism, greatly influenced the thinking of people all over the world.

Further, the ferment of India's independence struggle was felt by subjected colonial peoples the world over and was inspiration for many movements which developed in the post-Indian Independence period. These influences were felt in British Guiana, inspiring the four founders of PAC.

The four persons who founded the Political Affairs Committee were grounded in the struggles of the masses. The late HJM Hubbard was at the time General Secretary of the Trades Union Council; Ashton Chase was Assistant Secretary of the British Guiana

Labour Union, working under the founder of the Guyanese trade union movement, Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow; Cheddi Jagan was already, at this time, very active in the sugar workers' struggle and later led the Sawmill and Forest Workers' Union and GAWU; Janet Jagan had earlier that year been engaged in the formation of the Women's Political and Economic Organization, the first women's political movement in the then British Guiana. She was later to be active in the Clerk's Union and in the women's section of the British Guiana Labour Union.

Thirdly, the clear definition of the ideology of PAC and its intention to assist in the formation of a party equipped with socialist principles is a most important aspect, moreso when we consider that at that time the four founders were probably the only persons in British Guiana who had studied the subject and were convinced advocates of socialism. Without this important factor, the emergence of a party which stated openly its belief and adherence to socialist philosophy would have been delayed by many, many years.

During its three years of existence, the PAC grew slowly and steadily, bringing in such stalwarts as the late Ram Karran, Sydney King (now Eusi Kwayana). Charlie Cassato and George Robertson (deceased) and many others who helped in the foundation of the PPP and were active in the independence struggle and the building of an advanced political party.

As Ashton Chase recorded in his excellent study "A History of Trade Unionism in Guyana 1900 to 1961" the PAC and its members played an important role in some of the key workers' struggles of that period. The strike of bauxite workers in December 1946 grew into a stern struggle by these mine workers for union recognition, against unfair practices by the company and a stiff system of racial discrimination and segregation. Chase wrote on the subject: "The TUC with Mr. Hubbard as its General Secretary played a leading role in getting local people to assist the strikers as well as aiding in the presentation of the workers' case to the Committee (under the Labour Ordinance). A less conspicuous but not unimportant role in assisting the strikers and in directional and propaganda work was played by the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) which included Dr. Cheddi Jagan, Mrs. Jagan and the author (Ashton Chase)."

The well known struggle of the sugar workers on the East Coast of Demerara, leading to the shooting of the five workers, known as the Enmore Martyrs, in 1948, was also a struggle in which PAC members participated fully, "in the day to day organization of the strike ... raising funds for the strikers, in organizing 'soup kitchens' and in general propaganda work. The PAC agitational bulletins were widely circulated at the GIWU meetings" (History of Trade Unionism).

In early 1948, the Transport Workers Union called a strike brought about by the appointment of Col. Teare, whose despotism enraged transport workers. In this struggle, too, PAC was active and supportive, particularly through one of its new members who had joined in 1947, Ram Karran, a transport worker and militant union member.

Also at the international level, PAC gave labour solidarity when, in 1949, the Canadian Seamen's Union called a worldwide strike of its members on ships. Two bauxite ships manned by striking members of that union were held up in Port Georgetown, the Sun Whit and the Sun Avis. PAC members gave active solidarity, taking care of stranded seamen, arranging legal representation and carrying food to the striking seamen on their ships in the dead of night, slipping by the police boat patrols.

The Political Affairs Committee expanded its membership, formed discussion groups, distributed its bulletin, a mimeographed four-page publication, widely imported large quantities of socialist literature from abroad, sold on a wide scale, and thus laid the foundations for the formation of the People's Progressive Party, thus fulfilling its objective.

One of its members, Cheddi Jagan, won a seat in the Legislative Council in the 1947 elections, thus giving a broader forum for the PAC to propound its ideas. It was now becoming an organization recognized as a fighter for the working masses, for the first time in that period, giving voice to their demands and aspirations. His struggle and fighting spirit give tremendous impetus to the growth and popularity of the PAC.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the formation of PAC, it is well to remember the vital role this small group played in the development of the political and trade union movement, its sterling contribution to the cause of independence and political enlightenment in Guyana.

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