

COUNTER REVOLUTION IN BRITISH GUIANA BY PREMIER
CHEDDI JAGAN

The second phase of the counter-revolutionary battle is over. The first phase began last year with the February disturbances which ended up in rioting and looting and a large part of the commercial centre destroyed by fire. In the smoke of battle the main issues became clouded. One heard of the Government's sinister intentions, of fears and suspicions, of racial strife. But the basic causes of the struggle were not brought to the forefront.

For some time, deliberate attempts have been made to subvert my Government. Subversion has now given way to open rebellion. Last year the budget which was largely influenced by a Cambridge Economist, Mr. Nicholas Kaldor, was the excuse for the rebellion. This year the excuse was the Labour Relations Bill.

At the very beginning of the 11-week strike I indicated that it was politically inspired. This was corroborated very early by Mr. Burnham, Leader of the Opposition and later by Mr. Duncan Sandys. Mr. Burnham put it to me that the Labour Relations Bill was not the causa belli but the casus belli, not the cause of but the occasion for the rebellion.

The T.U.C. denied any political motivation. Note, however that the Commonwealth Commission which investigated the riots of February 1962 sparked off by the T.U.C. and the political Opposition had this to say of the T.U.C.

"There is very little doubt that, despite the loud protestations of the trade union leaders to the contrary, political affinities and aspirations played a large part in shaping their policy and formulating their programme of offering resistance to the budget and making a determined effort to change the government in office.

It has been proved beyond all doubt that the three most important trade unionists, Mr. Ishmael, Mr. Jackson and Mr. Sankar, were deeply involved in politics." (paragraphs 63 and 64).

"The story put forward before us was that the unbending and indeed the provocative attitude of the government was the sole reason for the decision to call a general strike, or at any rate for precipitating that decision. We find it difficult to believe this version and we are of the opinion that the facts have been greatly distorted by the trade union leaders for the purpose of placing the responsibility of arousing the workers' hostility upon the government." (paragraph 124).

The T.U.C. claimed that it called its affiliates out on strike not for political but for industrial reasons, that the far-reaching powers which the Bill gave the Government would have enabled it to muzzle and destroy the "free trade union movement." It was not opposed it said to the principle of the Bill, i.e. the taking of a poll among workers in any industry or in any bargaining unit to settle jurisdictional disputes between unions and to certify recognition for the purpose of collective bargaining. What it objected to it said were the provisions of the Bill

which it claimed would have put unlimited powers in the hands of the Government through the Minister and Commissioner of Labour. Yet later, when agreement was reached with the T.U.C. and the employers Association, the T.U.C. still dragged its feet and prolonged the strike. Indeed, at the very end when the Bill lapsed because of the prorogation of the Legislative Assembly, the T.U.C. insisted that the Bill must not be re-introduced.

Another point raised by the T.U.C. was lack of consultation. However, this was merely an excuse. It is to be noted that in 1962 after objections were raised by the T.U.C. to the budget, the Minister of Finance postponed consideration of it in the House of Assembly and fixed a date for discussion on Thursday, February 15. But before these discussions were held, the T.U.C. called a general strike on Tuesday, February 13. The fact is there was consultation. But the T.U.C. was not satisfied with mere consultation. What it wanted was to dictate to the Government, to tell the Government what laws to enact and when to enact them. This became apparent very early in the course of the strike.

There was nothing sinister about the Labour Relations Bill. It was patterned after the National Labour Relations (Wagner) Act of the New Deal Roosevelt Administration. The motivation for this Bill, as indeed its predecessor of the 1953 P.P.P. Government, was the same as that of the New Deal Administration; namely, the elimination of company unions, the ending of jurisdictional disputes and the establishment of democracy in the trade union movement.

The taking of the poll among workers is now recognised practice under the law in the U.S.A. and Canada. It has been established de facto in Jamaica. This practice is no doubt contrary to that in the United Kingdom. But British trade unionists must recognise the difference between Britain and British Guiana. Britain had a long history of trade unionism preceded by its many battles - Peterloo Massacre, the Chartist Movement, etc. - to preserve trade union rights and civil liberties for the working class. British Guianais still a colony. The employers here are a law unto themselves. Indeed, for many years they have been the Government and in many respects still are. As a Legislator from 1947 to 1953 I could not enter sugar plantations in my own constituency. It is only recently since the advent of the P.P.P. Government that militant trade unionists of a rival worker-backed sugar workers' union were allowed free access to the workers living in sugar plantations. Officials of the Sawmill and Forest Workers' Union experienced similar difficulties. They were prevented from entering isolated wood grants and quarries where exploitation was rife. (These quarries and grants were sited on crown lands.). Indeed, the Government is now enacting legislation to force employers to permit with adequate safeguards the entry of trade union officials and organisers in the work-place of employees.

Opposition to the Labour Relations Bill came from many strange quarters. Big business opposed the Bill as it did in 1953. So did the U.S. trade union movement which itself was developed and freed by a similar measure. Stranger however was the opposition of Mr. Burnham and his People's National Congress. At first they covertly and later after the prorogation of the Legislature when the Bill was no longer an issue overtly supported the strike. In 1953, Mr. Burnham as a Minister of the P.P.P. Government strongly backed a similar measure. The T.U.C. was also then in favour of the Bill. Trade unionists Andrew Jackson and Brentnol Blackman, as President of the Federation of Unions of Government Employees (F.U.G.E.) and General Secretary of the T.U.C. respectively defended the Bill in the United Kingdom

immediately after the suspension of the Constitution in 1953. A decade later they joined in leading the attack against the Bill.

Why this changed position? The reason is that Mr. Burnham broke away from the P.P.P. in 1955 and is now united with the political opposition of pre-1953. As regards the T.U.C., it should be noted that after the suspension of the Constitution in 1953 not only was the P.P.P. Government removed from office but the T.U.C. was also disbanded. Six unions controlled by the Opposition, headed by the sugarworkers' company union, the Manpower Citizens' Association (M.P.C.A.) formed a new T.U.C. This resulted from pressure through the I.C.F.T.U. Referring to this incident, William H. Knowles in his book "Trades Union Movement and Industrial Relations in the B.W.I." wrote:

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

The "general" strike was not so general. Of the 52,000 workers claimed by the T.U.C. only about half were on strike and the bulk of these included civil servants, teachers, government workers in postal and transport services. It is important to note that more than 90% of the sugar workers did not go on strike. These workers are represented by the M.P.C.A. whose President is also the President of the T.U.C. by virtue of the large number of delegates accorded the M.P.C.A. (the biggest union in the country) at the annual congress of the T.U.C. Many essential services - electricity, water, ferry, hospitals - were maintained. The industries mainly affected were bauxite and manganese.

The strike was kept going for 11 weeks mainly by funds supplied from the United States. The sum is estimated to be in the vicinity of \$100,000 per week. U.S. interference has been noticeable for some time. Last year during the February disturbances and earlier during the 1961 elections campaign the Christian Anti-Communist League was very active in Guyana. It admitted helping the political opposition with \$75,000 during the elections. U.S. trade unionists have also been very active. Mr. William McCabe was an active participant during the whole course of the strike. There is substantial evidence that while the British T.U.C. representatives, Walter Hood and Robert Willis, were endeavouring to affect a settlement, this American trade unionist was doing just the opposite. Indeed, there is proof that Mr. McCabe has been taking a political rather than a wholly trade union interest in our affairs.

The main purpose of these counter-revolutionary activities is to do one or more of three things -

- (i) Suspension of the Constitution;
- (ii) Indefinite delay of independence;
- (iii) Imposition of a constitutional and electoral formula which will bring the Opposition into power.

The Opposition has clearly stated that there shall be "no independence under Jagan." Using as an excuse a controversial but necessary budget it fomented in February 1962 disturbances and riots. These disturbances were subsequently used by the British Government firstly to delay independence talks and secondly not to grant independence at all. Talks which were to be held in May 1962 were postponed until

October 1962. These disturbances would not have taken place had the Governor brought in at the appropriate time a unit of the British armed forces stationed at Atkinson Field about twenty-five miles from Georgetown. It was agreed that the troops would have come in to aid the civil power at 1.00 a.m. on Friday, February 16, 1962. They did not come in until 3.00 p.m. when the fire and looting had already become rampant.

Independence was denied in October 1962 on the flimsy excuse that the Government and the Opposition could not agree; that my Government would not accede to immediate elections under a changed electoral system from the existing first-past-the-post to proportional representation. It is to be noted that the main opposition party, the P.N.C. had made independence a major issue at the August 1961 elections. Indeed, it had fixed May 31, 1962, as the date for independence for Guyana.

Rather than granting independence, the British Government indicated at the conclusion of the Talks that should social and economic conditions deteriorate it might have to consider the imposition of a solution. This is now the line which the Opposition is pursuing - create enough havoc to give the British Government the excuse to suspend the constitution or impose a solution. This was clearly voiced by the Opposition Press during the strike. As to our so-called free press, note that when the T.U.C. call for a general strike closed down the daily newspapers, the T.U.C. immediately ordered back to work the printing workers without even prior consultation with the Printing Workers Union so that the DAILY CHRONICLE AND EVENING POST could continue with their distortions and incitement.

The action of the British Government during the present disturbances is questionable. Constitutionally my Government is responsible for internal security and the preservation of law and order. The Police Force is constitutionally under the charge of an elected Minister but in reality this is only nominal. For promotion, discipline and control vest in a Police Service Commission of which the Governor is the Executive Head. During the course of the past few months it became apparent that, in effect, direct control is in the hands of the Governor. In other places, for example, Aden, Brunei, Swaziland, the Police and armed forces have been able to preserve order despite the peoples' opposition. Here the situation was allowed to deteriorate and the Ministers' advice was ignored by the Governor and the Commissioner of Police.

Mr. Duncan Sandys, Secretary of State for the Colonies, on his departure after a four-day visit proclaimed that the greatest problem in British Guiana was racial conflict. But what Mr. Sandys and others must note is that the spread of the disorders to the countryside and the racial conflict which ensued was due principally to the fact that Georgetown, predominantly Negro, was not pacified and government supporters, particularly Indians who were openly battered and bludgeoned lost faith in the law enforcing agencies and retaliated. Under the banner of passive resistance the Opposition squatted around government buildings and in government offices, riotously assembled in thousands in open breach of a proclamation prohibiting the assembly of more than five persons, looted stores, intimidated those who remained at work particularly government employees, and brutally beat up Ministers and government supporters, particularly Indians. Had the disorders been contained at the beginning and Georgetown pacified, there is absolutely no doubt that the racial conflict which subsequently occurred would have been prevented.

Race is merely superficial and skin-deep. Commenting on the question of race, the Commonwealth Commission said of the disturbances of February 1962:

"28. We found little evidence of any racial segregation in the social life of the country and in Georgetown. East Indians and Africans seemed to mix and associate with one another on terms of the greatest cordiality, though it was clear that the recent disturbances and the racial twist given to them by some of the unprincipled and self-seeking politicians had introduced slight, but it is hoped, transient over-tones of doubt and reserve. Among the inhabitants of Georgetown there is, of course, always present the danger that hostile and anti-racial sentiments may be aroused by a clash of the hopes and ambitions of rival politicians. We draw attention to this possibility because there have been indications of such friction in the past, although, as will appear in the course of this report, the disturbances of February 16 did not originate in a racial conflict, nor did they develop into a trial of strength between the East Indians and the Africans."

"50.....but we are merely drawing attention to the circumstances mentioned above in order to show that there is no clear-cut division between the races and that although, broadly speaking, Dr. Jagan's supporters are for the most part East Indians and the supporters of P.N.C. are drawn mostly from the African races, the difference is not really racial, but economic and vocational."

Race has never been a serious problem in Guyana. Indians and Africans have for many, many years played, worked and lived amicably together. Underlying the superficiality of racialism is the basic problem of the class struggle and the struggle for land and jobs. Prior to the 1955 split in the People's Progressive Party, the Africans and Indians, who constitute the backbone of the working class and peasantry, were united in their struggles against the capitalists and landlords. On every front - sugar plantations, water front, mines, mills, quarries, etc. - the workers battled for improved wages and working conditions. Since 1953, however, this militancy has been dulled. And this is due principally to the 'terror' rule which followed the 1953 suspension of the constitution, the 1955 Burnham-engineered split in the P.P.P. and the subsequent alliance of Mr. Burnham and his working class supporters with those reactionary elements who were opposed to the P.P.P. before the 1953 suspension.

The Indians support the P.P.P. for a complex of reasons, but mainly because of its socialist beliefs and objectives and because it has always led their struggles against landlords, mostly Indian, and sugar plantation capitalists. But the P.P.P.'s support does not come only from Indians. Because it is the most advanced party ideologically, it attracts the more political conscious particularly youths, students and intellectuals of all races. This accounts for the notable shift of young Africans towards the People's Progressive

Party, and for the racialist (Negro as opposed to Indian) appeal of the People's National Congress. This has been noted by the Riot Commission and such observers as Professor Peter Newman and Dr. Raymond Smith of the University of the West Indies.

In paragraph 50 of its ^Report, the Riot Commission said:

" The political professions of the P.N.C. were somewhat vague and amorphous. There was a tendency to give a racial tinge to its policy. Mr. Burnham expressed the opinion that it was Dr. Jagan who was responsible for this unfortunate development...

.....We do not, however, think that there is much substance in the contention of Mr. Burnham and it seems to us that whatever racial differences existed were brought about by political propaganda."

Professor Peter Newman in an article entitled "Racial Tension in British Guiana" said:

"...Not surprisingly, this attention to a unified African front led to a need for a common enemy, a role which was filled by the East Indians. Operating within the restricted social and economic framework that I have discussed, the main animus of the party (PNC) was focussed on the racial issue, and even official party pronouncements began to take on a racial tinge. Since the P.P.P. continued to maintain a public image of non-partisanship (although its local support was often less unbiased), many African intellectuals, especially among the younger group, began to feel dissatisfied with the racial policies of the PNC. Except in a few cases, this did not lead them to the PPP, but it did cause them to withhold active participation from the African party; partly as a result, the second-rank leadership of the PNC is distinctly less able than the corresponding echelons of Jagan's party."

Observers abroad have been perplexed to understand why my Government is opposed by the trade union movement. The answer is to be found in the fact that the Trades Union Council as at present constituted is dominated by unions associated with civil servants, teachers and other government employees in postal, airline, telephone and transport services, where the political opposition is well entrenched. It is a tragedy of Guyana that the Trades Union Council directs its attacks not as previously against the capitalist class but against a socialist oriented government. This explains why it has been supported by big business here and by reactionary elements abroad. The Georgetown Chamber of Commerce and other sections of big business, particularly shipping and oil interests gave support to the strikers by way of press publicity, financial contribution, lock-outs and a trade blockade. Essential supplies, particularly of food and fuel oil and gasoline were not brought into the country. The British Government failed through

the Governor to offer a solution. Had the Cuban Government not helped in sending supplies of fuel oils and flour it was very likely that my Government would have been forced to resign.

British Guiana is the acid test of western pronouncements and intentions. The West, particularly U.S. and Great Britain, has always proclaimed its beliefs in freedom and democracy, in free and fair elections, in constitutionality and the rule of law. President Kennedy in a recent letter to President Betancourt of Venezuela said the following:

" I should like, through you, to extend my congratulations and those of the people of this country to the people, government and armed forces of Venezuela for their action in preserving constitutional democracy against those who have attempted to overthrow your freely elected government.

The preservation and strengthening of freely elected constitutional government is the aspiration of all the peoples of the Americas and progress in this continent under the Alianza para el Progreso depends in large measure in effecting change through peaceful and democratic means and avoiding violent interruptions of the constitutional process.

We deeply deplore the loss of life and other heavy casualties which were caused in your country by recent insurrections and extend our condolences to those bereaved."

During his interview with the Editor of Izvestia in early 1962, he attacked the communists for subversion and condemned Dr. Fidel Castro for denying freedoms and not holding elections. In the same interview he said:

".....the United States supports the idea that every people should have the right to make a free choice of the kind of Government they want....Mr. Jagan who was recently elected Prime Minister in British Guiana is a Marxist, but the United States doesn't object because that choice was made by honest election, which he won."

But what is the reality? Dean Rusk, United States Secretary of State is reported last July to have urged the MacMillan Government to suspend our Constitution or to hold a referendum on a new system of voting.

Simultaneously, United States citizens, agencies and institutions - American Institute for Free Labour Development, Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, ICFIU and ORIT - have been actively engaged in subversion. Without the help given by these organisations, the strike would have collapsed in a couple of weeks.

British Guiana may well decide whether the road to the future will be peaceful or violent. For many years, long before the advent of Premier Khrushchev, the People's Progressive Party has been advocating the peaceful parliamentary road to socialism. The dilemma of the imperialists is that it advocates constitutionality but it cannot defeat the People's Progressive Party by its own rules and yardsticks at free

and fair elections. It is left to be seen what the final outcome will be. Will the British Government goaded by the U.S. change the electoral system merely to defeat the People's Progressive Party. This in effect would be rigging of elections? If this is done in Guyana, will it be done elsewhere where communist, socialist and radical parties either alone or in alliance are likely to win elections. Does it mean that the capitalist and allies will permit elections only so long as they can win? If the West is sincere in its pronouncements, it must demonstrate it by granting unconditional independence immediately. Only independence can permit of rapid social and economic progress and the removal of doubts and suspicions of our intentions. What happens in Guyana may very well indicate whether there will be peace in the world.

20th August, 1963.

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2000