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# CHEDDI JAGAN- PATRIOT AND TRADE UNIONIST

**THREE PRESENTATIONS DELIVERED AT A PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM AT THE  
CHEDDI JAGAN RESEARCH CENTRE, KINGSTON, GEORGETOWN, GUYANA- MARCH 6, 2002.**

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## **CHEDDI JAGAN - PATRIOT AND TRADE UNIONIST**

**Presentations by Grantley Culbard of the Clerical and the Commercial Workers Union (CCWU), Komal Chand of the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) and Professor Clive Thomas of the University of Guyana - delivered at a Symposium at the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, Kingston, Georgetown on March 6, 2002 on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the passing of Cheddi Jagan.**

## INTRODUCTION

That the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers' Union (GAWU) organized a Public Symposium, on March 6, 2002, to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the departure of Cheddi Jagan from the earthly domain should not have been for any surprise. And it wasn't.

That's because GAWU was paying the kind of tribute the man himself would have appreciated. He would have regarded the event - and the venue - as most eminently appropriate. Representatives of the working people of Guyana were meeting to discuss the contribution of one of their kind - albeit it is almost certain that his genuine modesty would not have allowed him to permit them to laud him, had he been actually around - but the working-class advocates were meeting to bring their intellects to bear on an analysis of patriotism and trade unionism.

The evening's exercise, in a way, epitomized the very character of Dr. Jagan. He was, after all, the son of down-trodden sugar workers, who began his consciousness of rich versus poor, of the economic and social disparity of classes and the need for political struggles and solutions in the pursuit of social justice, even before he left to study in the United States of America.

Never ever having or developing social pretensions or inferiority complexes, he used his stay in the USA of the early forties to sharpen his understanding of human exploitation and its many manifestations. In that "University of the USA", Cheddi Jagan created for himself his own "Faculty of Strategies for Representation of the Poor". He became truly, both a working-class intellectual and agitator.

The panelists and presenters of the March 2002 Symposium fitted well into that world so long created by the man they were honoring.

Speakers could not help risking repetition of the awesome one-man crusade for the colony's under-privileged workers launched by Cheddi Jagan during his initial Legislative tenure, 1947 - 1953, against both the colonial administration and big business in the then British Guiana. Anyone wishing to disparage Dr. Jagan or his memory, but who still possess a

conscience, should avail him or herself with a review of those vital battles waged and won by Cheddi Jagan.

Grantley Culbard and Komal Chand, not unexpectedly, regaled the attentive "Red House" audience with their accounts of Cheddi's legislative programmes of the working people and the passion with which he presented and prosecuted every just cause. Their reports revealed that "patriotism" should not be ever merely a word, but an actual manifestation of active work for one's country and its peoples. Cheddi Jagan, demonstrably, lived this out.

It was Professor Clive Thomas, however, who allowed his listeners some of his personal, and rare, insights into Jagan's passionate persona of the politician-patriot, who, in his lifelong struggle for what the working-class wanted to establish an almost "revolutionary" **Human Development Commission**. Clive Thomas, taken into the political thinker's confidence, was probably the first to exchange ideas on this project. Thomas reported that Cheddi wanted to "create a mechanism which would allow him to speak to all the social forces in this country" and about how he wanted it fashioned and administered.

That Cheddi Jagan formulated and internationalized a call and programme for a New International Human Order, as his life's work was unexpectedly wound up, would have come as no surprise to someone like Clive Thomas.

If this publication by GAWU achieves but one thing - the review, consideration and sustenance of contributions like Cheddi Jagan's - it would have been worthy of its production. The union is to be commended for adding to the national collection of the Labour Movement's literature.

May this booklet inspire current and new Jagans, Guyana's much-needed patriots.

**A.A. Fenty**

**Editor**

**October, 2002**

## THE WORKING MAN'S CHAMPION- PRESENTATION BY GRANTLEY CULBARD

I have had the honour and privilege, on several occasions, to meet and talk with the great patriot and trade unionist, Dr. Cheddi Jagan. I was always moved and deeply touched by the sincere way in which he expressed his beliefs, whether he was discussing political issues or industrial issues that impacted on the working man and woman.

Cheddi Jagan acted and spoke the way he did because he was the son of a sugar worker. He experienced the pain and suffering that workers endured over a long period of time. In his trade union days he associated with and worked to build more than one union- the Manpower Citizens' Association (MPCA), the Guyana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU), the Sawmill Workers Union (SWU) and the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers' Union (GAWU), to name a few. He served as treasurer of the MPCA in 1946 but later became disillusioned with that organization for, as he put it, it demonstrated a failure to be a militant instrument to fight for the rights of sugar workers. He, therefore, resigned from the MPCA. In 1947, he helped Dr. J.P. Latchmarsingh to establish the GIWU.

Dr. Jagan admired and worked along with the champion of trade unionism, Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow. They both believed that workers' representatives had to get into the legislature in order to advance the interest of the workers, the masses. It was no surprise when they both won seats in the Legislative Council in November 1947. Unfortunately, Comrade Critchlow was unseated by a Supreme Court's declaration that his election was null and void.

Dr. Jagan's success as a candidate for the Legislative Council was due in no small measure to the way he presented himself. He opined that for a candidate to give proper representation to the electorate, he should be fully aware of working-class conditions and problems; have a thorough knowledge of the theory and practice of comparative governments with special emphasis on labour legislation; constantly identify with labour's

grievances and aspirations; and be sincere and honest of purpose.

Dr. Jagan's personal manifesto dealt with constitutional change, agriculture, education, housing, medical service and labour legislation. With respect to labour legislation, he called for a 40-hour week without reduction-in-pay, a minimum wage law for all working people, portal-to-portal pay in certain industries, e.g., sugar, bauxite and timber industries; two weeks annual holiday-with-pay, time-and-a-half for over-time and double time for Sundays and holidays, equal pay for equal work, and improvement of working conditions with regards to health standards.

Dr. Cheddi Jagan championed the rights of workers by way of being an aggressive advocate in the Legislative Council. He paid a lot of attention to statistics in order to demonstrate how the workers were exploited by a vicious system. He attacked the privileges of the capitalists.

Every year, in the month of June, we remember the Enmore Martyrs, the five sugar workers who were shot and killed on June 16, 1948. That tragedy resulted from a strike on the sugar estate, which started in April of the same year. Although the workers said they were on strike for certain stated reasons, they really wanted to gain recognition for the GIWU. Dr. Jagan and his wife Janet, were among the principal leaders of the strike. The workers also protested the system of "cut-and-load", a change from "cut-and-drop." The recognized union, the MPCA, had previously signed an agreement with the Sugar Producers Association endorsing the "cut-and-load." Dr. Jagan and the GIWU castigated the MPCA for signing such an Agreement, accusing them of betraying the workers. The 1948 strike ended without the GIWU gaining recognition. However, things began to change for the better for the sugar workers with respect to certain conditions of work.

On October 29, 1950, a Cost-of-Living Advisory Committee was appointed under Section 6 of the Labour Ordinance to advise the authorities as to the quantum of relief to be given to government employees. The official cost-of-living index had skyrocketed. Non-government employees' unions also gave evidence before the

Committee. By this time, Dr. Jagan had also become President of the SWU and he gave evidence on behalf of that union. In the end, the Committee made twelve important recommendations to bring relief to the workers. It was in the same year that the People's Progressive Party was formed and Dr. Jagan became its leader.

The PPP said that it was dedicated to securing independence for Guyana and to free the country from the shackles of imperialist and capitalist oppression. Its first policy statement aimed at strengthening the trade union movement. It recognized that if it were to pursue the class struggle, it had to work in close collaboration with the trade-unions. The result was that the PPP and the trade unions worked together, planned together and struggled together to assault privilege and to change the political and economic system. The PPP won the 1953 General Election by a landslide but the PPP government only lasted for 133 days. In October 1953, the British Government suspended the constitution. The big shots were able to sow the seeds of disruption and this brought about the beginning of the split in the PPP, at the same time the unions began to separate from the Party. Here began too, the division in the working-class, along racial lines.

Before 1953, while Dr. Cheddi Jagan was operating on certain fronts he had his wife Janet, also advocating changes for the better for the working-class on another front. Mrs. Jagan was a member of the Georgetown Town Council from December 1950 to December 1952. In this period, she fought against great odds for increase in wages for Town Council watchmen and successfully defended the cases of aggrieved town constables. She and her husband supported a strike called for general wage increases for municipal workers and increases were secured.

In July 1951, the Government sent out a draft circular on the political activities of civil servants proposing to debar civil servants and government employees from taking part in politics. The Trades Union Congress and the PPP were united in their attitude to the circular. They demanded relaxation as far as industrial, non-policy making and manipulative government employees were concerned. The final circular,

which came out in November 1952, reasoned that it was necessary that political neutrality and impartiality of the workers referred to before, should be preserved. The important points outlined in the circular spoke to these employees not to-

1. Hold office in any political organization
2. Speak in public matters of political controversy.
3. Write letters to the press, broadcast, publish books or articles or circulate leaflets on political matters.

Canvass in support of political candidates.

Early in 1952, there was a big controversy when the Government dumped a large quantity of milk. The Federation of Union of Government Employees (FUGE) led that protest and received staunch support from the Jagans and the PPP. The Government's excuse for such action was that the milk was sour but that was later found to be untrue. Finally, orders were given to distribute supplies to school children. The workers' cry was that the community was suffering from malnutrition and thousands of gallons of milk were being wasted down the drains of the city.

It was no surprise in 1953, after the PPP took the reins of government, that four of the six ministers in the Council of Ministers were prominent trade unionists.

The Cheddi Jagan-led government acted on the recommendations of the Berbice Sawmill Workers' Advisory Committee Report. The minimum rates of wages of these workers were, on average, increased by 22 ½ %. In fact, this particular action on the part of the PPP government resulted from a minority report that was submitted by the trade unionists that sat on the Committee.

The government prescribed minimum wages for Cinema employees and hire-car, chauffeurs, notwithstanding protests from the respective proprietors. Minimum wages for watchmen were also increased.

The PPP Government also agreed, based on another report, the Nicholson Committee Report, to prescribe minimum wages for employees in Drug Stores, Hardware Stores, Groceries, and Dry Goods Stores. Naturally, the commercial community and the Chamber of Commerce protested against the prescriptions of these minimum wages.

In addition, the Government made regulations to extend the Holiday-with-Pay Ordinance to all sawmill workers.

The Cheddi Jagan-led government appointed a Committee, under the chairmanship of Ms. Jesse Burnham, to enquire into and to make recommendations on the conditions of employment and wages of domestic servants and washers.

The Committee submitted its report in November 1953, after the British removed the PPP from office. The report was not released. However, when the PPP regained the Government in 1957, they moved, in 1959, to legislate for two weeks' holiday-with-pay for domestic servants. The Government also brought domestic servants within the provisions of the Workmen's Compensation Ordinance in 1960.

Another Committee under the chairmanship of Ms. Jane- Phillips-Gay, the General Secretary of GIWU, was set up to recommend improvements in the Workmen's Compensation Ordinance.

The reduction in hours of work of firemen by the introduction of three 8-hour shifts and better employment opportunities and training for local seamen, also engaged the attention of Cheddi Jagan and his government.

The point to note about all of these events is that while the PPP was in Government at that time, they gave pride of place to trade unionists who were appointed to Committees. The Committees were weighted in favor of the working-class.

There was also a large debt owing to the Government by the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The Government had loaned the TUC money to send a

delegation to the World Federation of Trade Unions' Conference in 1945. At the time, it was unlikely that the TUC would be able to repay the loan. The PPP Government wiped it off.

While the PPP was in office in 1953, the GIWU made a renewed effort to gain recognition. They called a strike and other unions in the TUC took similar action in support of the GIWU. The GIWU strike lasted for 25 days but still, there was no recognition. However, in later years, the successor organization to GIWU, the GAWU, gained recognition in the 1970's while Mr. Winston Carrington was Minister of Labour. A poll was finally held and GAWU displaced the MPCA as the union to represent the sugar workers. Dr. Jagan served as Honorary President for a period of time and vigorously pursued the interests of the union even at the level of GTUC Conferences, after they were admitted as an affiliate.

All that I have said before was to demonstrate the consistency of Dr. Jagan over the years. He never departed from his conviction that everything must be done to advance the interests of the ordinary working man and woman if Guyana was to progress economically and otherwise. He also was firm in his belief that the trade union movement must be united to fully realize the interests of the workers. Unfortunately, today we are again experiencing a rift in the trade union movement because some unions are unhappy with the way the Guyana Trades Union Congress (GTUC) is operating. I sincerely hope that the Organization that Dr. Jagan has left behind, the GAWU, would do everything possible to work with others to bring about genuine trade union unity in Guyana.