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CHEDDI JAGAN- PATRIOT AND TRADE UNIONIST

THREE PRESENTATIONS DELIVERED AT A PUBLIC SYMPOSIUM AT THE
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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 5th 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
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AN AGENDA FOR LABOUR- PRESENTATION BY KOMAL CHAND

The Guyana Agricultural and General Workers' Union (GAWU) is proud to have organized this activity under the theme "Cheddi Jagan Patriot and Trade Unionist." I wish to take the opportunity to thank Dr Clive Thomas and Cde Grantley Culbard for accepting the Union's invitation to share in the panel discussion on this distinguished personality at this appropriate venue. The Cheddi Jagan Research Centre. Also, our appreciation to Dr. N.K. Gopaul who agreed to be our Moderator for this activity, at the shortest notice.

Five years ago, this day, Cheddi Jagan breathed his last. He departed this life after he had made a colossal contribution to the Guyanese people's struggle for freedom, justice and social progress. His contributions to end colonial rule in our country and to uplift our people from the vestiges of slavery, indentureship and colonialism itself, to a new life in an independent Guyana is especially noteworthy. He distinguished himself as a Guyanese patriot; never flinching in his resolve to bring political independence to Guyana; He never succumbed to pressures or temptation in his commitment to the Guyanese working people.

On Dr Jagan's return to Guyana in 1943, after qualifying as a dentist in the United States of America, it did not take him long to take up the cudgel of the workers and the downtrodden.

His experiences in America in many ways served as a great lesson to him. He became intimately acquainted with life of the working man and had first hand knowledge of their miserable living conditions of slums, poverty, segregation, discrimination, etc. In America too he began to read many books that expanded his intellectual horizons and inspired his interest in politics. In "The West on Trial" he said: "I had become more and more interested in politics and had a peep into socialism. Karl Marx's 'Kapital' was later to open up a whole new horizon."

Comrade Ashton Chase, in a recent lecture here, at this Cheddi Jagan

Research Centre, referred to the three major strikes in the 1940's in Guyana- a strike of the Bauxite workers at Mackenzie from April 13 to June 16, 1947; a four-day strike of the Transport Workers' Union in April 1948 and the sugar workers strike from April to June 1948. He traced Dr Jagan's involvement in those strikes.

Chase, referring to Dr Jagan, said "Both he and his wife Janet played an important role in all three major strikes.

They, as part of the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), played a key role in assisting the bauxite workers during their strike, in the subsequent presentation to the Committee of Enquiry and in directional and propaganda work, and helped in the TUC in sensitizing workers elsewhere and mobilizing their support for the bauxite workers".

Dr Jagan's assistance to the strikers and their Unions on those major strikes brings home clearly his fighting spirit and activist character which was demonstrated repeatedly throughout his life.

The GIWU's strike in 1948 witnessed Dr Jagan and his wife, Janet Jagan collecting money to operate "soup kitchens" for the strikers and their families and also spent time preparing and distributing propaganda leaflets to explain, and agitate the workers' cause.

With regard to the struggle of the sugar workers, Dr Jagan tried to influence changes in the Man-Power Citizen's Association. In 1945 he became the Treasurer of that Union. He did not manage to change the Union from within. He alluded in "The West on Trial" that he was removed from office after the end of one year due to two main factors his objection to the high expense allowance enjoyed by the big boys in the Union and the tendency of the Union leaders to collaborate with the sugar planters and to set the Union on the course of becoming company-dominated.

It was after his sojourn in the MPCA that he actively assisted in establishing the Guiana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU) the

predecessor of the present Guyana Agricultural and General Workers' Union (GAWU) of which he was the Honorary President for many years.

Dr Jagan was elected President of the Sawmill Workers Union (SWU) in 1949. That Union was later called the Sawmill and Forest Workers' Union (SFWU). He served that Union for many years and led many delegations advocating higher wages and better conditions of work for sawmill workers.

In 1955 he was precluded from attending the Union's Conference in Bartica as a result of the restriction that was imposed on him following the declaration of a state of emergency in October 1953 when the British Government suspended the Constitution and removed his democratically elected Government.

Dr Jagan's entry in the Legislative Council in November 1947, as a representative for the East Demerara Electoral District, provided the workers with a voice in the Legislative Council. He initiated labour-friendly Motions although he did not get the support of members of the Council to pass them. There was one calling for reduction in the normal hours of work of shop assistants and Hotel workers from 56 hours per week to 48 hours per week, as well as that for an additional half-day on Sunday.

In the "History of Trade Unionism in Guyana", now Senior Counsel Ashton Chase OE, recorded the following:-

"In Dr. Jagan, the workers found an outstanding champion of their rights. The solemnity of the Legislative Council was rudely shaken by his vigorous advocacy of the cause of workers. He had a passion for statistics. He used these in his pungent and forceful arguments to expose reaction and to lay bare before the workers, the vicious system that exploited them. At sitting after sitting, he assaulted the vaunted privileges of the capitalists. On many occasions, single handedly, but nevertheless most heroically and inspiringly he fought for the workers' rights".

Outside the Legislature he continued his active work supporting the struggle of the workers. He attended a rally organized by the Federation of Unions of Government Employees (FUGE) at the Parade Ground in March 1952 to protest the dumping of milk by the Government. No other legislator attended. On the invitation of the Union's President, Andrew Jackson, he addressed the gathering giving his full support.

A major event which contributed to the workers' struggle at the time was the formation of the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), the forerunner of the People's Progressive Party (PPP). The founding members being Dr Jagan, Cde Janet Jagan, Cde Ashton Chase and Cde H.J.M Hubbard. It is to be noted at that time, Hubbard was the General Secretary of the TUC and also Secretary of the British Guiana Clerks Association, now the Clerical and Commercial Workers Union, and Chase was the Assistant General Secretary of the British Guiana Labour Union. Here you see the active representatives of the workers playing a paramount role in the formation of the PAC.

It is not strange, therefore, that apart from the three major strikes referred to earlier, there were several others involving the Mental Hospital workers, Boat Builders, Shipwrights, Cinema Operators, Match Factory workers, Postmen, Printers and Bus Operators.

Cde. Chase pointed out: "The P.A.C supportive role in these struggles and its role in articulating public opinion in support were crucial factors in this era."

As a legislator during the 1947-1953 period, Dr Jagan became convinced that a new Party should be formed. Thus, in January 1950 the PPP was founded to promote the interest of the working class. On its banner, the principles of scientific socialism were set out and its main goals were independence for British Guiana and transformation of the economy to benefit the working people of Guyana.

In April 1953 the PPP, with its base support from the united working-class, obtained 18 out of 24 seats at the General Election - the first

election under universal adult suffrage. A new government took office with Dr Jagan at the head. The Government aggressively got down to business and began to address many issues although its activities were restricted. Regarding labour, the House of Assembly passed the Government's Labour Relations Bill which was intended to make it compulsory for employers to recognise and negotiate with the trade union enjoying majority support.

However, the Bill, passed in the House of Assembly on October 08, 1953, did not see the light of day. The Constitution was suspended by the British Government on October 09, 1953. Dr Jagan was restricted to the city of Georgetown and on breaking the restriction, he was jailed for six (6) months.

The Trades Union Congress also suffered. The united and militant TUC was disbanded after the suspension of the constitution. A new TUC formed in December 1953, unfortunately it was not able to uphold the militancy and progressive character of the former TUC.

Despite the manipulations by the British colonialists, Dr Jagan and the People's Progressive Party went on to win the elections held in 1957 and 1961. Under his Premiership, Britain denied the granting of Independence to Guyana. Instead, intent on removing him from Office, they shamelessly resorted to changing the electoral system to one of Proportional Representation which resulted in the PPP losing office in 1964 to a hastily contrived coalition.

His attempts to pass the progressive Labour Relations Bill in 1963 was met with stiff opposition, sadly, even by the leadership of the TUC, political Opposition forces and the CIA and British Intelligence.

But, whether in Government or in Opposition, Dr Jagan remained committed to the struggles of the Guyanese people. He tried tirelessly to heal the division of workers, which had followed the suspension of the Constitution in 1953 by the British Colonialists.

In 1975, since it was not possible to get the law in place to facilitate the recognition of trade unions of the workers' choice, he began to provide active guidance to our Union in the sugar industry. In recognizing the profound commitment of workers to advance the struggle for the recognition of the Union, Dr Jagan guided the Union to take strike action. For 13 weeks in 1975 the workers struck forcing the Government, at last, to agree to take a poll, which was won by the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers' Union with 98 per cent support of the votes cast on December 31, 1975.

Dr Jagan had a number of strengths which distinguished him. Above all, he had a brilliant analytical mind and a capacity to retain facts and figures. He used this effectively to make explicit, his ideas and arguments. In one of his "Straight Talk" articles referring to control of the TUC by the ruling PNC Party at the time, he wrote: "Control is exercised through trade union rigging and an undemocratic system of apportionment of delegates. Delegates to the GTUC Annual Conference are selected on a sliding scale and not on a proportional representation basis; 3 delegates for union with up to 200 members; 2 delegates for the next 300 members, and 1 delegate for every 500 members thereafter.

This system gives weightage to the PNC-controlled unions especially the small ones like the Association of Masters and Mistresses (AMM) which had absolutely no membership and was correctly deemed a paper union. It also leads to the registration and affiliation of miniscule unions such as the two unions representing Bank workers. The result of delegates' allocation for example is as follows: GAWU-1 delegate for 442 members AMM-1 for 60; the Guyana National Cooperative Bank Staff Association with a total of 40 members, 1 for 13.

All attempts to reform this unfair system have been resisted by the then ruling party and TUC. As a consequence, the Union in the two major industries- sugar and bauxite- were manipulated out of the GTUC Executive Committee at the 1982 Annual Delegates' Conference.

In that article, Dr Jagan explained that five (5) Unions with a total of

1,424 members or 1.8 per cent of the TUC's total membership had 23 per cent membership of the GTUC Executive Committee, while GAWU with 15,037 members or 20 per cent of the total membership of the TUC, ended after the 1982 TUC Conference with no representation.

Dr Jagan was also a formidable tactician, a democrat, sensitive and respectful to his comrades-in-arms and workers in general. I was able to see these qualities vividly demonstrated, once again, in the controversy over the ending of the Strike in May, 1989 which was supported by the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Guyana (FITUG).

Those of us who worked alongside with him at the Trade Union level, know well that Dr Jagan was never tired of repeating that our Union must always consult with its members, must always involve the workers' representatives in the course of making representations to the employers whether to redress a grievance or at bargaining over an agreement. This is an important lesson he left with GAWU which is very much respected and which today serves as a source of strength to the Union.

After the national and regional elections of October, 1992 Dr Jagan, as Executive President of Guyana, continued to embrace the workers' cause and support their interests.

The number of labour-friendly legislations passed - the Trade Union Recognition Act, the Prevention of Discrimination Act, the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Holidays with Pay Act (All workers are now covered; previously only certain categories of workers enjoyed this benefit) and the Termination of Employment and Severance Pay Act - passed in the National Assembly testified to this.

Dr Jagan's memory remains fresh with us. He was a steadfast champion of the working people and a true son of Guyana. He was a leader who stood unswervingly in his lofty principles and a leader who inspired us in battles and in periods of calm. From him, we have learnt that progress will come only from our united and principled struggles. To my mind, this lesson is among the lasting legacy he has left us.