

# **JANET JAGAN'S LEADERSHIP IN TURBULENT TIMES A FOCUS ON THE POLITICAL AND LABOUR CRISES IN THE 1950's AND 1960's**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**T**he Guyanese political environment since the 1950's has been marked by bitter race relations, especially between East Indians and Africans. While this bitterness can be traced back to the nineteenth century, it intensified with the split of the racially united People's Progressive Party (PPP) in the early 1950's (Premdas, 1974). Compounding this volatile situation are other

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divisive factors, such as ideology, class and the lust for power. While there is little conclusive evidence on which of these forces came first, there is some consensus that the country is divided. The result is encampment and "*tribal politics*" and the potential of mental silos in political and historical analyses. People tend to view the situation from "*where they sit*" in the political divide. Consequently, there are many "*truths*" as this depends on the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions and lenses of those making their contributions. One's truth is conditioned over time by childhood and later-in-life experiences, narratives told and read, culture, and ideology, among other factors. Thus, in this short narrative on Janet Jagan's leadership in the turbulent 1950's and 1960's, we acknowledge the possible existence of other truths and realities.

While a lot has been written about Guyana's political and socioeconomic history, much of this work has focussed on the role of Dr. Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham who dominated the political landscape during the 1950's–1990's. Little attention, if any, has been devoted in the literature to the contribution of Janet Jagan, in general, and her leadership, in particular (see Watson et al., 2005).

In this paper, we attempt to examine her role in the labour and political crises during the 1950's and 1960's. We begin by discussing the political climate during this period, focussing mainly on issues of governance and the quest for independence. We then look at the effects of foreign intervention, especially through the labour movement in and out of Guyana. Finally, against the backdrop of the labour and political struggles, we analyze the contributions of Janet Jagan, with a focus on selected aspects of her leadership.

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## GUYANESE POLITICS IN THE 1950's AND 1960's: AN OVERVIEW

Janet Jagan became involved in the labour movement soon after her arrival in the then British Guiana. She was a friend of trade unionist Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow and worked with the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU). She was Field Secretary of the British Guiana Clerks Association, working in the forefront of the struggle “*for better conditions for domestics*” (Janet Jagan, personal interview, 2007)<sup>1</sup>. Cheddi Jagan was also active in the labour movement. He served as the treasurer of the Manpower Citizens' Association (MPCA) but resigned because of a dispute with the union leadership over workers' rights; consequently, he helped to establish the Guiana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU) (Chase, 1964; Despres, 1967). The conflict between the MPCA and GIWU partly led to the MPCA mounting strong opposition against the Jagans (Chaison and Nageer, 1998).

In the early 1950's, the MPCA reconstituted itself to form the new Trade Union Congress (TUC) and came under “*complete control*” of the Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT), the Latin American arm of the US labour movement (Jagan, 1997). Through the TUC, ORIT infiltrated the labour movement in British Guiana as early as 1951 when one of its representatives, Serafino Romualdi, was sent to assess the growing popularity of the Jagans (Romualdi, 1967). Suspicious of the Jagans' ideological leanings, US labour worked with the local unions to build opposition against the PPP (Mars and Young, 2004; Ramcharran, 2005). The result was division in the labour movement, with the TUC supporting Burnham and the Peoples National Congress (PNC) and the GIWU supporting Jagan and the PPP. According to

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<sup>1</sup> Face-to-face interviews were conducted with Janet Jagan, Ashton Chase, and others by a research assistant working for one of the authors. The interviews were recorded and the notes transcribed and analyzed.

Ashton Chase, the Minister of Labour, Trade and Industry in the PPP government at that time, American labour "*influenced the TUC from being a body that was supportive of the PPP in 1953 to a body that was opposed to the PPP in 1957 and 1961*" (personal interview, 2007).

By the early 1960's, US labour intensified its operation in Latin America and replaced ORIT with the American Institute for Free Labour Development (AIFLD) (Buchanan, 1990). AIFLD officials made regular visits to British Guiana, and TUC leaders were invited to New York to meet with US labour leaders to plan attacks against what was perceived to be a communist-led PPP regime (Barnet, 1968). AIFLD strengthened local unions by offering training programs to key members and providing financial support during strikes. AIFLD also financed a radio program and a newsletter for the TUC through which anti-PPP and anti-communist propaganda were generated (Spinner, 1984). This led Dr. Jagan to accuse the AIFLD of instructing "*trade unionists in techniques of subversion and violence*" (AIFLD Report, as reported in Romualdi Papers, 5459, Box 2, File 8, August 1963).

Armed with foreign financial, technical and other support, the TUC organized several strikes against the PPP government, two of which were characterized by intense ethnic violence and destruction to property. Both strikes were instigated and financed by the United States government and the CIA working through the US labour movement (Declassified Document, Box 17, File 1, April 1963; Hirsh and Fletcher, 1977; Insight, 1967). The first was a one-week strike to protest the government's budget and ended only after British troops moved in to contain the disturbances (Declassified Document 263, February 1962). The second major strike was launched in April 1963 to protest the Government's Labour Relations Bill (Rabe, 2005), patterned after the Wagner Act in the United States. Unlike the previous one, this

strike lasted for 80 days and was characterized by violence, looting, arson, sabotage, and destruction to government buildings (*Guyana Times News Magazine*, 1964). Damages were in the millions. Believed to be one of the longest general strikes in the world, it brought the country to a virtual standstill, and culminated with new elections that saw the removal of the PPP government from office (Blum, 2003; Gafar, 2003; Waters and Daniels, 2005).

Looking back, Janet Jagan accused the American labour movement of “*corrupting trade unions here [British Guiana] and used their influence ... and their money to get rid of us [PPP]*” (personal interview, 2007). According to her, the CIA, working through the AFL-CIO, had close ties with the PNC and was the mastermind behind the disturbances aimed at toppling the PPP government. She recalled: “*... the CIA spent a lot of money on the PNC ... [they] tried to destabilize the government, tried to get us out of government by stimulating a racial war, by creating antagonism between blacks and East Indians*” (Steif, 1998, p. 35). In 1964, under an electoral system which favoured the PNC, new elections were held that resulted in the PPP losing power (Blum, 2003).

## **JANET JAGAN’S LEADERSHIP**

The political, racial, and labour strife which characterized events during the 1950's and 1960's is still remembered as a dark period in Guyana’s history. The Jagans not only experienced these events first hand, but were in the center of it all, and more often than not, became the object of fierce opposition — both foreign and local. In the midst of the maelstrom, Janet Jagan displayed remarkable leadership and courage, and stood by her husband, Cheddi Jagan, as his political partner (*Indo-Caribbean Times*, June,

2008). To fully understand the extent of Janet Jagan's contribution and her resilience during these turbulent times, we need to go a little further back in history.

Janet Jagan's political outlook was influenced by her own Jewish origin which she thought would mean permanent discrimination in Chicago (Rabe, 2005). She once mentioned that her Jewish background had ignited her "*interest in the underdog and in helping out the impoverished of the world*" (Janet Jagan's interview with Wasserman, 1997). This spirit might have contributed to the determination and tenacity she displayed for the rest of her political life.

Imbued with an intense degree of social consciousness, Janet Jagan joined the struggle to end exploitation in Guyana, to improve the quality of life of citizens, and to create a free and independent country (Spinner, 1984). According to her husband, Janet did not "*care about possessions and is always willing to go out of her way to help others*" (Jagan, 1997, p. 66). Beginning with the PAC, the forerunner of the PPP, Janet Jagan lobbied for women's right to vote in the general elections, and the welfare of workers. She was the principal architect behind the formation of the Women's Political and Economic Organization (WPEO), whose mission was to promote the economic welfare of women. In an interview with *Stabroek News* on July 12, 1989, Janet recalled:

*We achieved a lot. Women could not vote unless they were literate, owned property, or were above a certain income bracket ... As a group we protested [poorly constructed houses] because we felt that if houses were provided for the poor they should be proper houses, not slums. We disagreed with the*

*dumping of milk by the Milk Distribution Center, high prices and shortages.*

Her campaign for the political and social emancipation of women took her to the Women's International Democratic Federation's World Congress of Women in Copenhagen, Denmark (Fraser, 2004). Prior to her departure, she had launched the women's arm of the PPP, the Women's Progressive Organization, which she claimed was a struggle "*for the independence of the women and the implementation of stricter rules for their education*" (Janet Jagan's interview with *Stabroek News*, July 12, 1989).

On the labour front, Janet Jagan became the first woman to be elected to the Georgetown Town Council. During her tenure as counsellor (1950–1952), she struggled to secure wage increases for municipal workers and town council watchmen. She also fought for the right of quarry workers to hold meetings with their union representative at the work site (Jagan, 1997). More importantly, through the PAC, she and her husband championed the cause of sugar workers during the 1948 strike in which a number of striking workers were killed (Jagan, 1997). It was a telling moment in the political growth of Janet Jagan and her husband, as many of the workers were personally known to them. She recalled: "*We were involved...I collected funds and food, organized soup kitchens. The strike lasted a long time and I got to know the five men who became the Enmore Martyrs — the police shot them in the back*" (Steif, 1998, p. 34). It was this incident that catalyzed the formation of the PPP. When the PPP was launched in 1950, Janet Jagan was elected General Secretary and served in that post without a break until 1970. She was also appointed the first editor of *Thunder*, the official organ of the party (Spinner, 1984). As General Secretary, she made a tremendous contribution to the strengthening of the PPP by working with Indian and African groups to unify the party at all

levels (Premdas, 2005) despite criticism from political opponents and labour unions (Alexander Report, 1956). According to her husband, Janet Jagan was a good administrator and a hard worker (Jagan, 1997). Even her fiercest critics attached positive attributes to her by admitting that she was smart and organized (Rabe, 2005). But others saw her as an “*exceptionally able, ruthless, and energetic woman*” who was the “*dominating influence in the party*” (Declassified Document 1031/ 119, October 1953). It is possible that Janet Jagan was perceived in this manner because she posed a real threat to colonialism; others may have viewed her ideological perspectives as problematic. The Americans also saw Janet as the “*brain behind her husband*” and as the “*organizational wheelhouse of the PPP*” (Rabe, 2005, p. 182). While foreign officials may have frowned upon these attributes with cynicism, in the eyes of the working class, these were qualities worthy of emulation.

Janet Jagan endured significant hardships in the struggle with her husband for independence. She was jailed for six months on civil disobedience charges in 1954 following the suspension of the constitution. In an interview with *Stabroek News* (1989), she related her ordeal:

*I spent part of my sentence in the Georgetown prison and another part in the New Amsterdam jail. They tried to isolate me for fear that I would influence other prisoners...The food was horrible, and we weren't allowed to accept anything from the outside, except a comb and a toothbrush. Our clothes were made of flour bags and we went barefooted. We slept on canvas folding cots.*

Upon her release from prison, she was restricted to the confines of Georgetown and was prevented by colonial authorities to



return to Chicago to visit her dying father (Wasserman, 2003). This alone may be enough to break an average person, but she emerged stronger. It brings to mind one of the dimensions of leadership proposed by Warren Bennis; that is, leaders are twice born, meaning that they grow by overcoming and mastering painful experiences on the path to development (Bennis, 1994). Not only did she endure the injustice of confinement but Janet Jagan was also the object of a campaign of misinformation, distortions, and physical attacks. Stones were hurled at her during a public disturbance in the 1960's (Jagan, 1997), and critics labelled her as "*the most dangerous person in the colony*" (Rabe, 2005, p. 57). These indignities, however, did not break her, but strengthened her political will and resilience to continue her struggle "*to bring equality and end exploitation*" (*Stabroek News*, July 12, 1989). Reflecting upon her ordeal over the course of this period, several qualities emerged — tenacity, determination, strength of character, selflessness — all of which are the hallmarks of excellent leadership (Bennis, 1994; Bass and Riggio, 2006).

In the 1953 general election, Janet Jagan contested and won the Essequibo and Demerara constituency, thus contributing to the victory of the PPP. She was one of the first women to enter the House of Assembly, serving as Deputy Speaker (Spinner, 1984). She later returned to the Legislature following new election in 1957 to serve as Minister of Labour Health and Housing. As a Minister, she made great strides in improving the living conditions of ordinary people. For instance, she tabled a Shops' Ordinance Bill in 1958, reducing shop assistants' work-week from 47 hours to 40.75 hours. The Workmen's Compensation Act was amended to protect domestics and other marginalized workers. In Housing, she lobbied for the construction of low-cost, working-class housing and was able to get the Rent Restriction Ordinance extended beyond urban areas. In Health, she managed to secure

funding for the construction of cottage hospitals, health centres, and maternity and child welfare clinics in several interior locations (*Stabroek News*, April 30, 2009). Her record as Minister suggests a commitment to improving the quality of life for the disadvantaged.

Janet Jagan also demonstrated strength of character and political will during times of crisis, qualities which set successful leaders apart (Bennis, 1994; Manning and Curtis, 2002). She stood by her husband and other party stalwarts when the split took place in the PPP in 1955. According to the Robertson Report (1954), it was largely by the efforts of the Jagans that the PPP was kept united. Later, following the sudden death of Claude Christian, Minister of Home Affairs in 1963, she readily agreed to replace him in that capacity in the midst of intense political and labour turmoil. But her stint was short lived as she resigned to protest the slow response of the police and complicity of the Colonial authorities to the outbreak of violence at Wismar (Jagan, 1997). While some may disagree with her course of action, others would argue that she did the right thing to resign. She saw no point in holding an office in which the rule of law was allowed to deteriorate by the Colonial authorities. Her leaving was a way of protesting injustice and police inaction in the wake of violence.

Janet's excellent organizational skills and sharp mind elevated her to the undisputed position of manager of the party's day-to-day affairs. She had a "*knack for exerting influence directly in the executive committee and the central committee*" (*Stabroek News*, 30 April 2009). She was in the forefront of the struggle for free and fair elections and served as a member of the Elections Commission from 1968 to 1979, helping to expose electoral fraud perpetuated by the PNC in 1968 and 1973.

In sum, Janet Jagan's leadership during the crises in the 1950's and 1960's was vital in securing valuable workers' and women's rights; she was also instrumental in helping to keep the focus on a return to democracy that eventually came in 1992. After 1992, Janet Jagan continued to play an integral role in the political life of Guyana. She was elected as the President in 1997 and led the country until 1999, when she stepped down due to ill health, but remained a member of the PPP until her death in March 2009.

## CONCLUSION

In this short paper, we examined the role of Janet Jagan during the 1950's and 1960's, particularly her contribution to the labour, political, economic and social climate in Guyana. Her contribution and achievements spanned decades, commencing with her arrival in Guyana in the early 1940's and climaxing with her elevation to the Presidency in 1997. She towered as a figure of vision, strength, integrity, and courage in this dark period of Guyana's history. Commentators argue that her life, from the inception, revolved around building a political party to achieve political power in order to change society (*Stabroek News*, April, 30, 2009). In retrospect, this was exactly what she did. She was relentless in her advocacy and struggles for the working class people, women's rights, and democracy. Indeed, her work in these areas extended beyond the shores of Guyana to the far reaches of South Africa, Burma and elsewhere.

As a result of her contributions, Janet Jagan won many accolades including Guyana's highest honour, the Order of Excellence (O.E.). On the international scene, her quest for peace and justice was rewarded by the United Nations when she received the Ghandi Gold Medal for Peace, Democracy and Women's Rights by UNESCO.

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