

JANET JAGAN: A PIONEER AMONG WOMEN IN GUYANA

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Throughout her richly rewarding political career, Janet Jagan, born Janet Rosalie Rosenberg in Chicago, Illinois on October 20, 1920, can be considered to have worn several caps: student activist, political organizer, nurse, prisoner, writer, editor, publisher, city council woman, wife, mother, general secretary, advocate, parliamentarian, government minister, Ambassador, Prime Minister and President. The list of positions and roles seem *ad infinitum* if we look at her activities on countless committees and bodies. Her entire life, from her time as a young idealistic student in the United States of America to that of a retired President of Guyana¹, was a life of relentless perseverance, an

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abundance of energy and struggle in the cause of the working classes. Remarkably, and to everyone's disbelief, she was able to combine and successfully incorporate and execute, without any apparent stresses, and glorified fanfare,² several of her roles and tasks simultaneously, earning her enviable lifelong credits as a "woman of a number of firsts in her long history of involvement in her adopted country's politics."³

Indeed, and to the proud boast of the Jaganites and Jews everywhere, the record shows that she was to become Guyana's first editor of a major publication, first woman political prisoner, first founder and head of the country's largest women's organization, first female to be elected to the Georgetown City Council, first woman Deputy Speaker in the world in 1953, first woman cabinet minister under self-government, the first woman to hold the posts of Labour, Health, Housing and Home Affairs, later first woman Prime Minister and then the country's first female President. Her extraordinary career spread over more than the entire second half of the 20th century. To the end of her days, as one commentator has noted, she has defied political characterization.⁴

This short paper intends to show that Janet Jagan, some would say conveniently, used women's rights issues, and causes to champion the cause of all working peoples in Guyana and elsewhere. She, more than anyone else, saw the connections between women's rights and what is right for all of us. Jagan singularly was able to get women organized to meet national objectives. She was able to recognize that collective action is possible to change women's circumstances. To achieve her objectives Jagan started, encouraged and, some would argue, directed what no other woman in Guyana's history and much of the world for that matter – a movement to fight for women's dignity and rights. It will be shown, space permitting, that

women's rights and issues initially emerged as separate issues then gradually emerged as a collectivist cause in her grand strategy for all of Guyana.

It is also argued that Janet Jagan saw women's emancipation in terms of Marxist analysis, in that women were only a part of the general liberation of the oppressed, part of the problem of her proletarian revolution. Interestingly, her conviction for the rights and well-being of women dragged her to fight colonialism, imperialism and all other forms of oppression and bondage which trap people in poverty. This chapter of Mrs. Jagan's struggle (and that of her husband) has been well described elsewhere (Jagan, 1954; Premdas, 1974; Spinner, 1984).⁵ We must emphasize that Mrs. Jagan used several organizations and mediums to champion her beliefs, the one most singularly important was her husband, Cheddi Jagan.⁶ Much has been written as to who was the boss or driving force, Janet Jagan or Cheddi Jagan? Peter Fraser of *The Guardian* (London, March 30, 2009) sums it up simply and best: "Their marriage pleased neither parents. **Yet it created one of the most influential partnerships ever**" (Emphasis by the author).

Colonial Guyana was a perfect setting for Janet Jagan to launch and test her political convictions. Years of brutal colonization and open exploitation had left visible scars of neglect and deprivation everywhere among the working classes. Scholars, over the years, have spared no ink describing the slave/indentureship-like type of conditions that existed in Guyana during the 1940's (Beckford, 1972; Rodney, 1981; Thomas, 1984; Mangru, 1996). It must be noted that several commission reports from the Colonial government at that time also paint a gloomy picture of the lot of the working classes: poor housing, unsanitary water, long working hours, poor diet, a lack of health care, very low wages, and a variety of other injustices (Jagan, 1954).

ESTABLISHING THE FOUNDATIONS

Upon entering Guyana and while working as a nurse in her husband's dental practice, Mrs. Jagan spared no time in understanding and positioning herself in the Guyana she decided to call home. When everything is considered, it is apparent that Mrs. Jagan, from the outset or very soon thereafter upon entering Guyana, had clear objectives on what she was going to accomplish. Evidently, Mrs. Jagan was knowledgeable of the country she was to call home. Her husband apparently had briefed her. She readily did several unconventional things for a woman, particularly a white woman, which was to dramatically raise her profile in the gossip prone colony. She told Laurie Goering of the *Chicago Tribune*: "I like to see things done. I don't shove off problems."⁷ In the rural areas she walked with bare feet in rice paddy waters, to the awe of poor, illiterate farmers – a first for a white woman. Her 'doctor husband' had already begun to attract attention in the days of "doctor politics" (Janet Jagan, 1997). She quickly became a kind of folk heroine, the blue-eye daughter-in-law (*boujje*) among the poor, lowly, uneducated Indo-Guyanese rural proletariat, a status she held until her passing. So prominent she had become among the Indo-Guyanese population that in a predominantly Indian populated constituency, the Indians twice voted for white Janet Jagan in preference to the resident Indian landlords, shopkeepers, money-lenders and rice millers (Jagan, 1954).

In the city, Mrs. Jagan took part in serious discussions at the public library on the state of Guyana under British rule, even suggesting the vote for women and an end to colonialism, a definite no-no subject in those times. She compiled documentary evidence on the state of affairs of the City of Georgetown working classes, especially the thousands of women who were toiling for wages which could not pay for their rent or food.

Letters to the city's pro-government newspapers flowed. She and her husband took turns firing off letters, exposing how colonial interests were pillaging the colony. In one of her letters, a letter prompted by the wanton sexual licentiousness and the large amount of unwanted pregnancies in the City of Georgetown, she suggested a legal recourse to abortion. The Catholic Church, a flock consisting of mostly Portuguese, spared no pains in painting her as evil, an attack the Portuguese community kept on her throughout the 1950's and 1960's. They saw her and her husband's progressive policies, called communist by the Portuguese and other reactionaries, as being inherently evil and devastating. A vast body of literature on this exists (see Newman, 1964; Reno, 1964; Despres, 1967).

The 1930's were the days of much union activity. As conditions grew worse during the War years, trades unionism grew correspondingly (Chase, 1966; Singh, 1988). In Georgetown, one union stood out as being militant and truly representative. The British had branded its leader a communist in the mode of Trotsky. Mrs. Jagan was not to be left out. She immediately became involved in the labour struggle, a tradition which she had started while she was a student in the United States. She gravitated to Guyana's first-ever union which was trying to organize neglected city workers in the dark days of depression, unemployment, underemployment and outright exploitation (Chase, 1966). She, to the consternation of the city's rich and idle, lent her organizing skills to the legendary labour hero, Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow to organize lowly paid employees in the City of Georgetown.⁸

Women in Georgetown were only a small segment of the population which was down on the totem pole. The lowly, hapless plight of the rural poor, mostly Indo-Guyanese, the stock from which Janet Jagan's husband Cheddi came from suffered

immensely under the plantation system. The brutalities of the plantation system are well described elsewhere (see Adamson, 1972; Beckford, 1972; Rodney, 1981; Thomas, 1984; Mangru, 1993). Women in Guyana then, like women in most countries at that time, were limited, subjected not only by their inferior economic roles on the plantation, but also by the restrictive cultural and God-given, tradition-bound religious dictates and norms they had supposedly inherited at birth (Ghurye, 1932; Gould, 1954). Mrs. Jagan had a tall order to fulfill. She was not going to fight only the vulgarities of plantation. She was set to take on the whole colonial apparatus.

JANET'S ANTI-COLONIAL STANCE

Mrs. Jagan had many reasons for trying to win Guyana's fight against colonialism and for independence by using women. Anyone who is vaguely familiar with Janet Jagan knows the familiar line that she was born in depression-era Chicago to radical middle class Jewish parents who fiercely opposed her marriage to Cheddi Jagan in 1943.^{9,10} Few, however, are aware that her Chicago environment and Jewish background conditioned and impacted upon her to be the formidable character and unwavering champion of the underdog.¹¹

Her Chicago in the first half of the 20th century was one of rampant racism, bigotry, discrimination, violence, bloody strikes, the extraordinary disadvantages of being poor, and the glittering advantages of being rich. Janet Jagan grew up among the severely deprived and exploited. Janet Jagan and her parents suffered as Jews because Jews then were not the most welcomed people in the U.S. They were generally held in contempt and suspicion for simply being Jews. Janet's father had to anglicize his name (adopting Roberts) in order to secure work. He could not

have assisted much in Janet's quest for higher education,¹² a sad state of affairs Mrs. Jagan never wanted to discuss. As a form of compensation, Janet Jagan pushed for the education of women throughout her life, opening schools, child care centres, and the like.¹³

It was in this Chicago and Detroit, where she studied¹⁴ and was active in progressive student life,¹⁵ that she came to the conclusion that all oppressed men and women belonged to a particular class and shared not only a biological identity, but also a political and social one. Women's emancipation, Janet Jagan learned, could only be achieved by the shattering of capitalism and the free market system. Janet was later to discover that the women in Guyana were worse off than women in the U.S.A.¹⁶ For example, as she was to see first hand when she entered Guyana, that many women were working twelve hours and more in water up to their waist, only to eat after every one else in the household. Worse yet, women were forced to marry against their wishes, and when they got married, they were subjected to the whims of their mother-in-laws, brother-in-laws, and husband. Several studies have been done highlighting these abuses and horrors stories (Jayawardena, 1963; Mangru, 1993; Moore, 1995).

As the woman who pioneered the women's struggle in Guyana, she followed the writings of Marx and Lenin. She reminded her audience that Lenin said, "*The chief task of the working women's movement is to fight for economic and social equality for women. The chief thing is to get women to take part in socially productive labour, to liberate them from "domestic slavery," to free them from their stupefying and humiliating subjugation to the eternal drudgery of the kitchen and nursery*" (Quoted in Women's Progressive Organization, 1983a). Economic dependence was and is perhaps the greatest factor in women's inequality in Guyana.

When Janet Jagan entered Guyana, she arrived armed with what one writer said was the "*Little Lenin Library*" which provided her husband¹⁷ with his grounding in Marxism.¹⁸ She had strong challenging views on the role of women in the changing Guyanese society. In essence, Mrs. Jagan emphasized that the active participation of women was essential for the building of a new Guyana. In her numerous meetings with both men and women, Mrs. Jagan kept sticking to Lenin. She would point out: "*Unless women are brought to take an independent part, not only in political life, but also in daily and universal public service, it is no use talking about full and stable democracy, let alone socialism*" (Women's Progressive Organization, 1983b, p. 5). The emancipation of women, she consistently argued, is dependent upon a fundamental and radical change in their economic and social role in the community: "*the liberation of women,*" she writes, "*is inescapable from the liberation of men. Both women and men must together struggle to bring about the new socialist society*" (Janet Jagan, 1988, p. 17-18). Later she was to put women's issues on the same bar as those of men. In the PPP manifesto, dubbed the Political Program of the PPP, she reiterated her agenda that women's liberation will be possible when socialism was achieved. Thus liberation of women, she noted, was inseparable from the liberation of men (Women's Progressive Organization, 1983b, p. 21). However, to effect the complete emancipation of women and make it equal to that men, Mrs. Jagan argued that it was necessary for the national economy to be socialized and women to participate in all common productive labour. Using Lenin's reasoning she, over the years, posited that socialism is a class and political concept; its essence lies in the socialization of the basic means of production and distribution and the establishment of the rule of the working people (Jagan, 1975; Jagan, 1985). Mrs. Jagan doctrinaire approach to socialism caused her and Guyana countless problems. The story of British and American intervention in

Guyana is well known (Jagan, 1966; de Kadt, 1972; Birbalsingh, 1997).

The history of Mrs. Janet Jagan in nearly all of the latter part of the 20th century was a fight between those who wanted a socialized mode of production and the establishment of the rule of the working people, and those who were totally against such concepts and thoughts. Account after account has been written from the suspension of the constitution in 1953 to the dark and brutal incidents of the 1960's to the nakedness of the Forbes Burnham dictatorship, and every tragic incident in between (Reno, 1964; Despres, 1967; Latin American Bureau, 1984). Mrs. Jagan and the party she co-founded and directed was able to have much done for women over the years but the forces of history and circumstances were to deny her the socialization of the mode of production in Guyana and the rule of the proletariat (Singh, 1972; Premdas, 1978; Thomas, 1976).

WOMEN IN GUYANA IN THE 1940's

The Guyana that Janet Jagan entered in 1943 was not a society tolerant or accommodating of progressive ideas or institutions. Janet Jagan came to Guyana armed with grand notions of social justice, equality and egalitarianism. Instead, she found suffocating British norms the order of the day: snobbery, a presumption of superiority, domination and outright exploitation (Glasgow, 1970; Moore, 1987; 1995; Thomas, 1984). Politics then was the domain of a few wealthy males in a male-dominated society; room also definitely did not exist for any view or opinion that was contrary to British interests or tastes. Working women at every level of the society were at the very bottom of the pyramid. Economically, they held the most degrading jobs; socially, they were subjugated by cultural and religious customs,

a tradition which still exists in many parts of the world today. In her quest to ameliorate the conditions of women and other working classes her task, therefore, was herculean (Reno, 1964; Despres, 1967; Singh, 1972; 1988).

Women in Guyana then, like women most countries then, were really down, subjected not only by their inferior economic roles on the plantation, but also by the restrictive cultural backwardness and tradition-bound religious dictates and norms they have supposedly inherited at birth. Essentially, they were confined mainly to housewifery and child upbringing. This condition was abhorred by Mrs. Jagan. She was fond of quoting Friedrich Engels, "... *the first condition for the liberation of his wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry*" (quoted in the People's Progressive Party, 1983, p. 3). Additionally, discriminatory laws were made and discriminatory social attitudes were inculcated in society reinforcing the inferior status of women (Engels quoted in the People's Progressive Party, 1983, p. 3). Until the 1953 elections, women who had no income and owned no property, and those who earned less than ten dollars a month did not have the right to vote. Few women had any property and very few earned more than ten dollars a month. After long hours of work, they immediately had to attend to the demands of family obligations, mostly bombastic male needs. Women battering, abuse and sometimes outright violence were common among rural-based women. The shortage of women in the population further exacerbated the violence in the society (Jayawardena, 1963; Mangru, 1993). Mrs. Jagan was to learn as soon as she had set up 'house' in Georgetown with her husband that she had to assist her husband's other brothers. A task this Marxist house wife had to fulfill with due diligence.

Upon entering Guyana, Mrs. Jagan, as we have earlier noted, immediately continued the tradition which she had started in the

U.S.A. while she was a student. She joined the labour struggle in Georgetown, supporting the one union which stood out as being militant and truly representative of the city's neglected workers. She, to the consternation of the city's rich and idle, lent her organizing skills to the legendary labour hero, Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow, to organize lowly paid employees in the City of Georgetown.¹⁹ Georgetown had two classes: the rich and those who served the rich. Mrs. Jagan tried to insulate herself between these two blocs.

By the looks of it all, Guyana was ripe to be mobilized. The subjective conditions for a revolution were all there. The objective conditions apparently were not present. Mrs. Jagan and her husband were not able to confront the British by way of an armed insurrection, thereby ending colonial rule, a pattern that was emerging in many colonial territories. In this environment, however, Mrs. Jagan became the least likely but most successful champion of women's rights in Guyana.

THE RISE OF WOMEN IN GUYANA

Janet Jagan was the singular person who must be credited for raising the bar on women's rights in Guyana when they were none. She consistently kept it alive, as an organizer of domestic servants early in the 1940's to her death in 2009.²⁰ Janet Jagan was ahead of her time. For instance, it is reported that the most significant event in establishing a sense of a women's movement in Canada was the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), which issued its report in September 1970 (Cohen, 1993).

Trades unionism, tea-table discussion groups and letters to the editors were only a part of the arsenal of Mrs. Jagan. Apparently

as Professor Thomas Spinner had observed, Mrs. Jagan, being familiar with the political and economic realities of Guyana, readily saw, as the writer Muniram noted, that the participation of women was essential for the building of a new Guyana, and the emancipation of women was dependent upon a fundamental change in their economic and social role in the community (Muniram, 1985).

Two things readily came to her mind. First, was that Guyanese women faced severe hardships of male domination and were hampered in the struggle for better conditions. As such she kept engaging each and everyone on the subject of women's rights. It seems at an early stage that there was nothing to stop her from her burning desire. One positive gain which came as a result of her agitation was that an increasing number of influential people saw the need for all women to have the right to vote, a right which was given in 1953. The inclusion of all women into the electorate consistently gave the PPP Party a numerical victory at the polls in all elections since 1953. Mrs Jagan role in this facet of Guyana's history has never been analyzed.

Janet Jagan's understanding of Marx and Engel's convinced her that there must be a proletarian revolution and all the shackles of British colonialism in Guyana had to be broken before women and all other working classes could see any meaningful gains or changes in their lives. Evidently, more organization of and for women at the national level and mass mobilization throughout the country were essential for any dent to be made against the various colonial interests blocking any progressive movement for women's rights.

A new organization, the Women's Political and Economic Organization (WPEO), headed by Mrs. Janet Jagan, was launched on July 12, 1946. It was to be an "organization of working class

women, housewives, trades unionists, shop girls, domestics, civil servants, social workers and all others." ²¹ Mr. Jagan was directly out to prevent the exploitation of women in the area of domestics where there was widespread exploitation (Janet Jagan, 1983, p. 7). This was a new organization, something with a new and radical agenda. It was to be a launching pad for her grand entry into Guyanese politics. It was a testing ground at mass political organization. As one commentator noted, it emerged as the first serious women's organization to fight "for women's rights and for an improvement in social and economic conditions for the entire population" (Muniram, 1985, p. 22).

At the conclusion of the launching of the WPEO, the meeting called on the government to immediately implement the following demands:²²

- 1) improved housing in rural and urban districts, and for electricity to rural areas;
- 2) establishment of Government hospitals and improved medical services in rural areas;
- 3) passing a minimum wage law for women workers;
- 4) continuation of price control and educating women about price control and intelligent buying;
- 5) subsidization of essential foodstuffs;
- 6) establishing an excess profits tax;
- 7) improving education facilities throughout the country, and starting a system of adult education;
- 8) setting up Government libraries in rural and urban districts;
- 9) educating women to enable them to set up consumers and producers cooperatives;
- 10) improving roads;
- 11) organizing a system through which radios could be made available in various communities;

12) extension of the voting rights to housewives through the implementation of universal adult suffrage.

Attempts will not be made here to analyze whether Mrs. Jagan and later her PPP government was able to implement the abovementioned list. What is known for sure is that Mrs. Jagan did not stop with these simple demands. Later, under the umbrella of the Women's Progressive Organization (WPO) which she founded in 1953, she eloquently advanced issues such as malnutrition, education, workers compensation, child welfare clinics, health centres and rent restriction.

Mrs. Jagan was quickly able to sell the WPEO package to some of the educated in Georgetown, especially the women who were not dining at any one of the Crown's tables. The fight for better working and housing conditions, maternity benefits, crèches, shorter hours, change in the pension age for women, and of course more pay and benefits, were some of the other concerns she put on her agenda.²³ Her fight for maternity benefits, laws concerning prostitution and rape certainly reflected an enlightened position which was not held in many developed countries. Many in Georgetown gravitated to her. Hence, when she ran for a seat on the Georgetown City Council, she won easily.

Since the beginning of time, more often than not, women's groups were formed and a few women got together and just talked (Cohen, 1993, p. 7). In Guyana, the struggle of women has been intrinsically linked with the struggles, first against slavery then, against the indenture system of exploitation, and then with the struggle against colonialism. When Guyana gained independence in 1966, the struggle continued for economic independence, and for the restoration of democracy until 1992,

when the party which Mrs. Jagan helped to launch in 1950 won the national elections.

Mrs. Janet Jagan was simply not only interested in gaining improved medical conditions or libraries for women. Her agenda, as envisioned from her socialist perspective, was sweeping and radical. The WPEO agenda was simply a partial action plan.

At the same time as the WPEO was pushing its agenda, Mrs. Jagan oversaw the formation of the Political Affairs Committee (PAC). On November 26, 1946, Janet Jagan and others²⁴ launched the PAC and the *PAC Bulletin*. The first *PAC Bulletin* emphatically stated it was the objective of the PAC "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 Scientific Socialism."²⁵

To date, every analyst looking at the rise of political consciousness in Guyana, together with the first attempt at joining the two main ethnic groups (East Indian and African) into a mass-based political organization, has attributed success to PAC. Janet Jagan was to write: "The political education of the people of British Guiana began. It was an awakening from a slumber. These were indeed great changes, welcomed by many, hated by those who wanted you to remain quiet, subservient, ignorant and asleep politically."²⁶

By the end of the 1940's, the Jagans had established, through the WPEO and PAC, groups and cells in the entire country. Mrs. Jagan created a vast network of supporters and sympathizers who gathered weekly at their bottom houses to discuss issues put forward by the Jagan's. We should recall that after the Enmore massacre, Dr. Jagan's name had become a household name. He

had the ability to transcend class, social, religious and occupational boundaries, in ways that other political doctors of the time, Dr. Joseph Lachmarsing, Dr. Robert Hanoman-Singh and Dr. Jang Bahadur Singh never could do.

When the PPP was launched in 1950, Janet Jagan, as General Secretary of the Party, made sure that in what is called the Political Program of the Party that a special section was dedicated to the *"Equality of Man and Woman."* It was rendition of Marx and Lenin's views on how women should be emancipated, some of the key views we have alluded to earlier. Essentially, it was that the liberation of women is inseparable from the liberation of men, and that all oppressed men and women belonged to a particular class and share not only a biological identity but also a political and social one.

Less than one month after the PPP's stunning victory in 1953,²⁷ Janet Jagan, while as the Deputy Speaker of the House of Assembly, launched the WPO on May 27, 1953.²⁸ The WPO had a massive countrywide grass roots base, which was in the making, since the formation of the WPEO and the PAC. The main task of the WPO was *"to change the attitudes of women about themselves, to help them realize their potentials, the rights they must battle for and to see themselves not only as wives and mothers, but as human beings."*²⁹ (Janet Jagan, 1988, p. 20).

To achieve such an objective, Mrs. Jagan made her most significant contribution to the development of Guyanese women. It was her bold and imaginative push for education/schooling for women (Bacchus, 1980). *"Without a sound education and training,"* Mrs. Jagan had argued, *"women can never reach equality, particularly in the field of winning better job opportunities"* (Janet Jagan, 1988, p. 16). Her view was in stark contrast to the old attitude that it was a waste of time and

money to educate girls as they would eventually be married. As she pushed for all girls in primary schools, and then urged for higher education, Guyanese society came to be fundamentally altered. Guyanese society saw a massive proliferation of primary and secondary schools when the PPP was in office during the Colonial British administration. Attendance by girls skyrocketed. Secondary schools were followed by teacher training colleges and the University of Guyana.

Space does not permit providing details on the various proposals and recommendations that were put forward by Mrs. Jagan, and which of them had been successfully implemented. It must be noted that her crowning moment came in 1957, when as a Minister in the PPP Government, her skills as an organizer and administrator, earned the praise and admiration of her worst detractors, even British officials (Spinner, 1984, p. 73). In 1957, Mrs Jagan saw the Shops Ordinance Act passed, restricting the working week of shop assistants to 40 hours and 45 minutes instead of 47 hours, and providing for annual holidays with pay. The Workmen's Compensation Act was also amended to extend protection to domestics and other marginalized workers for the first time. In health, several cottage hospitals, health centres and maternity clinics and child welfare clinics were constructed in rural and riverian districts. In more remote areas, teams of dentists, doctors and dispensers were dispatched to provide medical care. In housing, the Rent Restriction Ordinance was extended beyond urban areas, and the construction of low cost housing was promoted throughout the country.³⁰ When Mrs. Jagan was not in office, the WPO dealt with issues such as malnutrition, meals for school children, family planning, old age pension, equal pay for equal work, free maternity care, and affordable housing.³¹

The WPO emerged as one of the largest grouping of people in the Caribbean, dedicated mainly to catering for the needs of women at both the economic and political levels of the Guyanese society. The WPO, to this date, remains to fulfill such a role. It, however, became more than that. Throughout Mrs. Jagan's political career, women were directed to support every political action and cause put forward by the PPP party and its affiliated unions, notably the rural-based Guyana Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU) of which Mrs. Jagan's husband was the Honorary President. Much of the history of Guyana in the second half of the 20th century is the history of industrial action by members of GAWU. Women and children of members painfully suffered when strikes were periodically called.

Before she passed away, Mrs. Jagan set several tasks for the WPO in the period ahead. The keen reader might be interested in the list of tasks. They are:³²

- 1) ensure that the Party has an official policy of promoting women;
- 2) recruit more women candidates to run for public office;
- 3) provide specialized campaign skills targeting women needs;
- 4) ensure that more women are allowed in programs that can help them financially and educationally;
- 5) create stronger networks of women groups across the country with women who share a common ideology;
- 6) expose the harmful effects of outside cultures in our society;
- 7) work closer with men to get them to support women issues;
- 8) work with all to educate society about the disintegration of the family and societal values;
- 9) teach women about the protection of the environment, about negative social practices and attitudes;
- 10) encourage women and their families to see education as a priority;

- 11) teach women to serve their country;
- 12) imbibe women and their families with enthusiasm and positive attitudes toward the Party and its sections.

The WPO remains today as a progressive organization in Guyana's political life. Today, however, it functions mainly as the women's arm of the PPP. It does not have the same vigour and clout as it had in the days of British colonialism. Some would argue that it probably needs new goals and objectives and that it had served its original objectives well. Mrs. Janet Jagan is not around to tell. What we know for sure is that she has set a list of tasks for the WPO. What is very clear also is that Mrs. Jagan had initiated a movement for women which today could be a formidable force in Guyanese political life. Daily life for Guyanese women may not be what she had envisaged in 1943. Anyone vaguely familiar with recent Guyanese history may well be aware that history and circumstance were not always on her side.

CONCLUSION

Without doubt, Mrs. Janet Jagan set in motion a radical and progressive movement which forever changed the political landscape of the country. She was to raise the bar on women's issues and causes when there were none. By pushing education for girls, she gave women the vision to participate in nation building. Simultaneously, she vigorously took on women's issues and causes and transformed them into national issues, waging a bold and imaginative struggle against brutal and callous British colonialism and imperialism, the suffocating plantation structure and the religious norms of the inhabitants of Guyana. Mrs. Jagan always held the firm view that women must join in the struggle to bring about political and socioeconomic changes to achieve equal opportunities for all. Mrs. Jagan strongly believed that

women, and for that matter, all other oppressed classes in the society, cannot attain anything without an end to all forms of oppression. In the end, she was more than a highly regarded defender of women's and workers' rights. She was a history maker, earning credits as a woman of a number of firsts.

When she left Chicago, she was sufficiently armed and educated to easily immerse herself into the political life of Guyana. Her husband's prominence in Guyana directly enabled and facilitated her entry into the politics of Guyana. Mrs. Jagan saw a vacuum in Guyanese society. There was a lack of any meaningful organization championing the rights of women. Women in Guyana were oppressed at every level of Guyanese society. Drawing upon her convictions as a student of Marx, Engels and Lenin, she argued that the rights of women and men are the same: the struggle for one cannot be done without the other. This she was able to achieve when she co-founded the People's Progressive Party (PPP), the present ruling party of Guyana.

Side by side with the PPP, Mrs. Jagan, initially through the WPEO, and later the enduring WPO, was able to isolate and identify issues and causes pertaining to women. Issues such as maternity benefits, pension benefits for women survivors and health clinics for women and children bear her imprint. Much of the present legislation in Guyana, which pertains principally to women, is the handiwork of Janet Jagan.

Working women and other working classes probably would fare better in Guyana had it not been for the numerous roadblocks placed in the way of Mrs. and Dr. Jagan. Mrs. Jagan passed each and every hurdle with grace and dignity. When she passed away, every one, friend and foe, spared time to say she was truly a remarkable woman, a real first among women in the world.

ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this article we shall refer to Guyana, the name of the independent nation, even though it was British Guiana.
2. Orin Gordon of the BBC aptly notes: "*She didn't do motorcades or she didn't dress up very much. She wasn't a 'string of pearls person'.*" <http://jwablog.jwa.org/remembering-janet-jagan>.
3. http://www.jagan.org/janet_jagan3.htm), and as Colin Smith of the BBC has noted, first in "the region and globally" (*Janet Jagan Remembered*, <http://www.bbc.couk/caribbeannews/story/2009/04>).
4. <http://guyanagovernance.blogspot.com/2009/04/obituary-janet-jagan-oe-october-20-1920.html>. *Time* magazine once called her "*the most controversial woman in South American politics*" (<http://www.forward.com/articles/104488>).
5. Thomas Spinner (1984, p. 19) opens his chapter *Cheddi Jagan, Forbes Burnham, and The People's Progressive Party* with: "*Without Janet Rosenberg, Cheddi Jagan might very well become a prosperous, contented Georgetown dentist. The Chicago girl molded and reshaped the vague sense of injustice only partially formed by the impressionable student's experiences on the sugar plantations of British Guiana and in the racial and social atmosphere of America in the 1930's.*"
6. On December 18, 1987, Dr. Jagan, in a speech at Freedom House, celebrating his 40th anniversary as a parliamentarian, said "*In these years, what ever I have achieved can be credited firstly to my parents and my wife.*"
7. Laurie Goering. "Chicagoan Who Became President of Guyana." *Chicago Tribune*. April 28, 2009 (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-jagan>).

8. http://www.jagan.org/jagan/janet_jagan3htm
9. Cheddi Jagan's parents also opposed the marriage. It is on record that Janet's father threatened to shoot his daughter's suitor. (See Spinner, p.22).
10. She was a student nurse at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, when she met Cheddi Jagan, a dentistry student at Northwestern University.
11. Janet Jagan told her cousin Suzanne Wasserman, who made an award-winning documentary about Janet in 2003 that her Jewish background sparked her "interest in the underdog and in helping out the impoverished of the world." This piece is from J.J. Goldberg, "Guyana Leader Was Always Her Own (Jewish) Woman." Forward.com 1st April, 2009 (<http://www.forward.com/articles/104488>)
12. Many find him, as they have found Janet, to be controversial. For instance, he is described a Conservative Republican radical. who did not support his daughter marriage to a non-Jew.
13. One blogger has noted that her innate insecurity, incomplete academic record and unorthodox marriage against the wishes of her father, compounded with her feelings of inadequacy explain much of the tenacity she displayed in her life in Guyana (Guyana-governance-obituary).
14. She attended several universities (University of Detroit; Wayne State University; Michigan State College) dabbling in physics and bacteriology, before enrolling in the Cook County School of Nursing (Chicago), but she did not complete the course. Her meeting with Cheddi Jagan "brought her formal academic education to an end" (<http://guyanagovernance.blogspot.com>).
15. For details on this, see Dr. Jagan's, *The West On Trial* (1966).

16. The women's movement is in radically different stages in different regions of the world. See Paglia (2002).
17. She, as *The Independent* of 1st of April, 2009 noted, has always dismissed as a racist myth, put about the British, any suggestion that she was the real driving force behind Cheddi Jagan's career.
18. See Peter Fraser, "Janet Jagan: American-born first female president of Guyana who stuck to her Marxist Views." *The Guardian*, 30th March, 2009.
19. http://www.jagan.org/jagan/janet_jagan
20. Colin Smith of the BBC writes that she was "still active in mainline politics until her death." <http://www.bbc.co.uk/caribbean/news/story/2009/04/28/04/2009>
21. <http://www.guyanaorg/features>
22. <http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/chapter115.html>
23. Much of the material here is taken from various WPO publications, such as the *History of the Struggle of Guyanese Women* (October, 1983).
24. The notable others were Cheddi Jagan, Ashton Chase, and H.J. M. Hubbard.
25. 40 Years the People's Champion. *Thunder*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1987, p. 3, and <http://www.ppp-civic.org/history/historyppp.htm>.
26. http://www.jagan.org/janet_jagan15.htm
27. In the British White Paper on the suspension of the British Guiana Constitution it was stated that "Mrs. Jagan, who is Secretary of the Party was a member of the Young Communist League when in America, attended the Third World Congress of the Women's International Democratic Federation (Communist) in Copenhagen in June, and later visited Rumania." <http://www.jagan.org/articles/5a.htm>). When Mrs. Jagan addressed this conference, she said : "We, the colonial peoples under British domination, are

- obliged to sell at low prices and to buy at higher prices. Thus wages never cover the cost of living ... our women are hoping for a future granting them equal rights and the possibility to develop their talents, as the women of Eastern Europe.*" Janet Jagan in "Forward With the Women's Struggle," p. 11.
28. The other founding members were Jane Philips Gay, Jessica Huntley, and Ms. Aukland.
 29. Mrs. Jagan used the WPO on her tasks for international solidarity and the global peace movement. As she has summarized on the WPO on the 25th Anniversary and 7th Congress: "The WPO has been involved in establishing bonds of friendship with women in other parts of the world, fighting for peace, giving solidarity to women experiencing oppression and oppressed by dictatorial regimes" (Janet Jagan. *History of the Struggle*, p. 16).
 30. Much of this material is taken from WPO publications, such as Janet Jagan's Achievement and Purposeful Activity: Hallmark of WPO's 35th Year of Struggle. *Thunder*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1988.
 31. http://www.myhero.com/go/hero.asp?hero=j_jagan
 32. <http://www.ppp-civic.org/wpo/wpoformation.htm>

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