

## Canadian Seamen in Guyana -1949

I thought of recording a piece of history which, probably very few Guyanese know. I believe that just about everyone involved in the incident is dead except for me.

It was one of Guyana's early encounters with Canadians, but not high-level executives and engineers like those at the bauxite company in Mc Kenzie, now Linden, but with Canadian workers and trade unionists.

The happening took place in April 1949 when two Canadian vessels lay at anchor in Georgetown harbour, the Sunavis and the Sunwhit, owned by the Aluminum Company of Canada, Alcan. The Canadian Seamen's Union had called a worldwide strike which meant that all ships in port with union members on board, were on strike, whichever port they were in. The Canadian Seamen's Union (CSU) was seeking better pay for its seamen, a shortened work week of 48 hours at sea and 40 hours in port and a closed shop. There was also a jurisdictional dispute with ship owners trying to force CSU members to join another union, Canadian Lake Seamen's Union and if not scabs were introduced to get CSU members off ships.

So it was in all, a highly explosive situation and one the CSU decided to fight by calling a worldwide strike of its seamen. In Georgetown harbour, when the strike began, police officers boarded the ships and eventually, when it was clear that the boats were not going to move, went for warrants for the arrest of the seamen.

According to the account in the book "Against the Tide" the story of the Canadian Seamen's Union by Jim Green: "While there Sunavis crew waited for the warrants to be served, they were able to secure the backing of the British Guiana and West Indies Federated Seamen's Union which vowed not to touch any CSU ships.

The British Guiana Trade Union Council declared that if this action was not sufficient, it would find other means of support. The seamen secured the gangplank and maintained watches. On April 4, two truckloads of steel helmeted police armed with revolvers, tear gas and rifles assembled on the docks and were loaded into police launches. They cast off and headed for the Sunavis." The seamen were able to head off the show of force with words. They said "This is Canada" (meaning the ship) and as the book reported: "Amazingly the police turned and left without boarding or attempting to serve the warrants."

The author expressed the belief that this was because a major sugar strike had just concluded and the Governor was anxious to avoid any more bloodshed. (Was he referring to the Enmore strike of 1948 which continued after the killing of the Enmore Martyrs on June 16, 1948?)

Scab crews were flown in from Canada, but there was some confusion because they were used to receiving higher rates than those offered to man the two Canadian ships. In the meantime, the crew of the Sunwhit did not do as well as those of the Sunavis. They were arrested and taken ashore and thrown in prison. They were charged and put on bail the next day.

The author records how the crews were supported during the strike: "Unknown to the authorities, the CSU members had two secret links to the shore. One was Cheddi Jagan, leftwing politician and organizer destined to become Guyana's first premier elected under universal adult suffrage, who rowed out to the ship in a skiff to bring news and food." The other shore link was a sailor who used to swim back and forth to the boat, unknown to the police.

I remember the period well. Dr Jagan, myself and others used to row out to the ships almost every night carrying water, loaves of bread and other food and news. We helped the crews to obtain the services of local lawyers and helped arrange accommodation and meals for the seamen who had been arrested and put on bail.

It was a heady period and the seamen were strong and courageous men, loyal to their union. We learned a lot from them.

The local unions, unfortunately were not strong enough to resist pressures. The TUC weakened and the Waterfront Workers' Union members loaded and unloaded Canadian ships. Finally, the crew men of Sunavis were arrested and on June 1, 1949 they were behind bars in the prison.

The book notes that they were "driven up the street like a bunch of cattle to the court." They were held in prison for 16 days before being released.

The story as it relates to Guiana ends thusly: "After attending a party thrown in their honour by Cheddi Jagan, they were flown home." And so ends the story of the Canadian Seamen in Guyana.

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