

National Service — An act of Coercion

Janet Jagan

The issue of compulsory National Service, which has become the most controversial subject in Guyana, began on October 17, 1973 when Mr. L. F. S. Burnham delivered an address at the official opening of the Faculty of Education Building at the University of Guyana campus. He said:

"I think that a young man, or a young woman, in these times, should be exposed before entering an institution of higher learning, especially if the State pays for that learning, to the society and give service to that society.

"If I have my way, and subject to the approval of Parliament, aspirants for a degree at the local university would be required to enter into a period of national service after leaving secondary school.

"It seems to me that our young people leaving the secondary institutions should be exposed to at least 12 to 14 months of national service so they could understand how the farmer thinks, so they could enjoy the beauties of Guyana".

He warned that although the present session at the University of Guyana had already begun, those students would only "temporarily escape" the new policy.

Soon after these utterances, opposition groups began lodging their protests. The People's Progressive Party charged the PNC regime with moving to stifle higher education in the country and condemned the proposed national service as a "political weapon to hatchet militants from the academic mainstream and preventing them from reaching the University".

"Twelve to eighteen months of national service" stated the PPP "can only be regarded with grave suspicion. There

are strong possibilities that they may be used as a means of restricting enrolment and eliminating from future student bodies those who refuse to toe the PNC line. In a country that has abandoned democratic elections, such a move can only be regarded as repressive and smacking of further discrimination".

At the PPP press conference on October 20, it was stated that a strong anti-government feeling was developing at the University of Guyana. This trend, it was noted, could be one of the many reasons for the extension of national service to cover admission to the University of Guyana.

The *Mirror* newspaper, in its editorial of October 21, challenged the reason put forward by Burnham that compulsory national service would be introduced in order that prospective students would become acquainted with the problems of Guyana. "We believe" said the editorial, "that the majority of students applying for admittance to the University of Guyana have a fair idea of the problems of life in Guyana. Most of them come from poor families and a great number of UG students have to work for a living.

"The sons and daughters of well-to-do parents on the whole, who seek university education, go abroad. We are certain that a census of the economic position of UG students will reveal that the majority are all too familiar with the economic problems of Guyana. So what will they learn by taking them out in the bush and having them do free labour for the bankrupt government which should be employing the unemployed unskilled workers for such tasks.

"What we do believe is likely is that the PNC regime is looking for new methods of restricting admission to the University of Guyana. It fears the growth of anti-government feeling at the University, which is inevitable under existing conditions. Behind the threat of a 12-18 months period of compulsory national service for UG students is the greater danger of entrance restriction which could lead to even greater discrimination than that which now exists in Guyana.

"That this important matter will be decided by parliament is as comical as it is tragic. That that self-imposed group calling itself the parliament will decide on such an

important issue exposes once again that Guyana is living under a minority government that cannot claim to have derived its position from the support of the people".

The Liberator Party which "won" two seats in the July 16, 1973 elections attacked the Prime Minister's proposals as a waste of manpower. "In a country such as ours" stated the Liberator Party, "where more than 100,000 are unemployed, where the majority of the unemployed are unskilled, and where over 60% of the population is under 21, such compulsory national service is a waste of manpower. If, as the Prime Minister says 'we are a poor country in a hurry', why add 18 months to the 5-year period now required merely to get a basic BA or BSc degree?"

Then in November, 1973, Mr. Burnham, as leader of the People's National Congress (PNC), at his party's congress at Queen's College, announced that National Service would include, as well, a voluntary young Brigade embracing primary school children between the ages of 8 and 14. A second category, he announced, would include a national Cadet Corps of trainees from 14 to 18 and a young workers corps for young people leaving primary school. A further category would include a National Pioneer Corps for school leavers at secondary school level seeking employment and for the unemployed. He reiterated that national service would be compulsory for prospective entrants to the University of Guyana and that civil servants would have to go through a period of National Service in order to retain their jobs.

"In time", he told the PNC Congress, "there would be no question of obtaining employment in Guyana without having first gone through National Service training".

Three months after Burnham made his first announcement about National Service, the subject came up for discussion in the National Assembly on January 9, 1974. During the one day 'debate' (there is no real opposition in parliament following the boycott by the People's Progressive Party) thousands of placard carrying demonstrators voiced their protest outside parliament buildings, chanting "No National Service". The demonstrations with some 13 political, cultural, trade union and farmers organisations participating, made clear the people's feelings about Na-

NATIONAL SERVICE — AN ACT OF COERCION

tional Service. Those joining the demonstrations included the PPP, ASCRIA, People's Democratic Movement, Guyana Council of Indian Organisations, the Liberator Party, Civil Liberties Action Council, Movement Against Oppression, Rice Producers' Association, Guyana Agricultural Workers' Union, Progressive Youth Organisation, the United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman, the Guyana Public Service Workers' Union, the Mahatma Gandhi Organisation and the Women's Progressive Organisation.

During the course of his presentation of the State Paper on National Service, the Prime Minister uttered his usual clichés about "removing the last vestiges of colonialism", "new type colonialism", "ownership and control of natural resources" and even used history to try to justify the imposition of national service without the consent of the majority.

In the State Paper presented to the National Assembly it was ironic to find the government talking about equal opportunities when the nation is wracked and in agony over the widespread discrimination and favouritism that exists. "Our cooperative socialist philosophy" notes the State Paper "requires that all Guyanese should be given equal opportunities, and that the general system should be so designed as to ensure that this is so. In particular, economic power should be wielded not by a small group of individuals for their own limited purposes, but by or on behalf of the people for the good of all". This demagogic language was reminiscent of the phoney slogans that have poured out from the Government Information Services of "cooperative socialism", "making the small man a real man" and "feeding, housing and clothing the nation by 1976".

During the course of his address on National Service, Mr. Burnham said that Cuba has such a national service scheme "where it mobilizes all Cubans". He failed to note that Cuba has a revolutionary government fully backed by the people, not a minority government which usurped power by fraud and has failed to get people's support or consent.

On this point, the PPP in a press statement on January 12, 1974 said: "The Cuban government, unlike the PNC regime, serves the people and not the foreign and local capitalists and ruling political elite. Because of this, overwhelm-

ing support is forthcoming. The PPP denounces the PNC's cynical attempt to bamboozle the people by this reference to the Cuban national mobilization, and to compare it with its own phoney National Service plans. There were no '1,000 Cubans in Guyana' when the PNC leader tried some 14 years ago to whip up hysteria against the PPP government: they were all in Cuba, helping the government to build socialism in that island. The Cuban people are working for themselves, and not, as in Guyana, being exhorted to use their labour power to line the pockets of the PNC millionaires and to create a new propertied class".

The PPP referred to Burnham's remarks that, apart from the basic freedoms of speech and association, very important was the freedom to work. "Every person", he said "has a right to work, a duty to work".

"But" said the PPP "how could one possibly speak of a right and a duty to work if that person is not fitted by training to work? The PPP asks, 'Where are the jobs? And whose fault is it that after nine years of PNC rule, and six years of absolute political power, the people are not qualified?' About 30% of the labour force is unemployed. Among youths, the situation is worse.

"The PNC has failed to build factories, to provide jobs. They talk about agriculture. But agriculture today is in a parlous state because of the policies of the PNC. Consequently, urban consumers suffer from shortages and high prices and there is a rural-urban trek of about 25,000 persons a year.

"Thousands of farmers cannot get a plot of land on the coast. They talk about the hinterland because they have failed to drain and irrigate coastal lands. And in the interior, they have neglected the Amerindians; the few settlements they have established lie in ruins. . . .

"The fact is primary schools are understaffed, ill-equipped and overcrowded. There are no places for over 40,000 children. The PNC regime has admitted that three-quarters of primary school leavers are unable to read properly. There are not enough places in technical institutes, the Agricultural College and the University of Guyana. And there is a brain drain — trained personnel is leaving. This

NATIONAL SERVICE — AN ACT OF COERCION

is because of firstly, political and racial discrimination; secondly, corruption, squandermania, nepotism and favouritism".

A petition signed by the Civil Liberties Action Council, the People's Progressive Party, the Liberal Party, the People's Democratic Movement, the United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman, the Mahatma Gandhi Organisation, the Movement Against Oppression, the Guyana Rice Producers' Association and the Guyana Public Service Workers' Union which was presented to the Government pointed out the unconstitutionality of National Service. The petition declared that it violates Article 6 (3) (d) which states that no person shall be required to perform forced labour except under very special circumstances.

The petition also denounced the coercive elements of National Service, which makes it obligatory for those wishing to enter the University of Guyana to give national service. "It is therefore a coercion, a method of obtaining his labour by force in order to enjoy a right — the right to the fullest use of the facilities provided by the state to which he has paid taxes.

"It is a device by the PNC regime which ultimately will deprive all of their rights — the right to freedom of movement, the right to dissent, the right to freedom of assembly, etc. — on various pretexts. We therefore call on the citizens of Guyana to resist the introduction of this measure by all means at their disposal".

While massive demonstrations were going on around the Public Buildings when the State Paper on National Service was presented to the National Assembly, there were 10 days of demonstrations in Anna Regina, Essequibo, on the islands of Leguan and Wakenaam, at Canals Polder, Vreed-en-Hoop, Blairmont, New Amsterdam and in the Corentyne. Throughout the country areas, there was a successful two-day boycott of the schools.

Thousands of posters were put up all over Guyana — "NO NATIONAL SERVICE. DOWN WITH FORCED LABOUR".

Other organisations, too, expressed their abhorrence of

the scheme. The University of Guyana Students' Society condemned National Service as a new form of slavery. In its official publication, "THE STUDENT", the society attacked National Service as a violation of the rights of the citizens of Guyana and asked "Why should it be a criteria for admission to the UG?"

The Group of the Progressive Youth Organisation (PYO) at the University of Guyana added new points to the arguments against National Service. It referred to the State Paper's promise to train farmers, calling this "bare-faced hypocrisy". "In 1966 when our rice farmers came to Georgetown to ask for increased prices, in order to take care of the needs of their children, the PNC regime let loose police dogs on them. Could this same regime which showed such hatred to our farmers be so genuinely interested in training young farmers in National Service?" the youth group asked.

The PNC regime was reminded of the use of force to uproot farmers and others who had squatted on lands owned by foreign capital. It also charged the PNC regime with discrimination by not requiring overseas voters to undertake a period of national service. The UG, PYO group made reference to the promise that national service would be used to develop the interior and pointed to the gross neglect of the Amerindian population and the refusal to give them titles to their lands.

In the face of such widespread and strong disapproval of the scheme the PNC regime backed down temporarily on the issue of compulsory national service, indicating that the main branch, the Pioneer Corps, is intended to be compulsory but in the initial stages it will be voluntary.

How National Service will be Constituted

- (a) The Young Brigade: children between 8 and 14 within primary schools. National Service on weekends and holidays.
- (b) The National Cadet Corps. Voluntary service as under (a) above but for children 12 to 18 years of age in post-primary educational institutions (secondary, technical, apprenticeship and productivity).

NATIONAL SERVICE — AN ACT OF COERCION

- (c) The New Opportunity Corps. For Guyanese up to the age of 16 in reform schools.
- (d) Pioneer Corps. A 1-year period of training with the Guyana Defence Force for all between ages of 18 and 25. Compulsory, but voluntary in initial stages.
- (e) The Special Service Corps. For professionals and skilled Guyanese for periods up to 8 weeks every 5 years.

A number of reasons have been expressed for opposition to the National Service Scheme and these can be summarised as follows:

1. No consensus — the PNC regime got into power without the consent of the people — rigged elections and military takeover of the ballot boxes; the majority of Guyanese do not agree to National Service.
2. No real need for National Service—no emergency; no threat to the nation; no need to mobilize the people to fight an enemy or resist invasion.
3. The skills, training, "on-the-job learning" the "new values", which the State Paper on National Service gives as reasons for its introduction could be easily achieved through our school system — by adding technical training to primary and secondary schools and expanding the technical schools. Teachers could be trained and oriented to teach students through teachers training, if that is what they want. This method is more efficient and inexpensive.
4. If it is intended to break open the interior, develop the hinterland, this can be achieved better by:—
 - (a) giving employment to the large corps of unemployed; giving them jobs and restoring their self confidence. They could be employed through the public works department.
 - (b) taking prisoners to the interior. Conditions would

be healthier for prisoners and at the same time they could be rehabilitated and make a positive contribution to the economy.

- (c) employ Amerindians who have the greatest difficulty in obtaining employment.

5. The cost will be prohibitive. The country cannot afford such expenditure, besides, there will be corruption, massive waste and "jobs for the boys". The basic needs of the nation are left unsolved while money is wasted on these projects.

6. The whole scheme is intended to be used as a coercive weapon against the anti-government forces. National Service was originally suggested as a means of restricting entry of students to the UG — mainly to cut off growing support for the PPP. It will also be used as another means of controlling job distribution, as done now with jobs going to PNC card-holders.

From all the facts of the National Service Scheme, it seems certain that this is one more step in the direction of the creation of a fascist, one-party state by the PNC regime. The people's rights are being violated one by one.

The People's Progressive Party has called on the Guyanese people to rally together to resist and continue its firm opposition to this latest threat.

Copyright © Nadira Jagan-Brancier 2009

On Poverty

"An unusually large number of persons, raided the lorries and took as many bags (of condemned potatoes) as they possibly could with the result that only a very small portion of bags were finally buried at the dump".

— Mayor of Georgetown —