

30 years since the P.A.C.

By JANET JAGAN

On November 6, 1976, the People's Progressive Party commemorated the 30th anniversary of the formation of the Political Affairs Committee. (PAC). This was the organisation from which the People's Progressive Party emerged in January 1950. Thus, its three years of existence form part of the important history of the PPP.

Writing about her recollections of that period for the Mirror newspaper, Janet Jagan made the following notes:

It was a book, as I recall the events which led to the formation of the Political Affairs Committee, which brought together the four persons who founded it. The Political Affairs Committee was the body which led to the formation of the People's Progressive Party which led the movement in Guyana for independence and socialism.

The book that started this process was "The Problem of India" by R. Palme Dutt, who was one of the foremost theoreticians of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He wrote many wonderful books and was the Editor of "Labour Monthly" which he founded in 1921.

Cheddi and I were walking in Water Street, Georgetown, one day in 1946 when we passed a shop window that contained some books. We paused to examine the titles and saw, to our astonishment, this book of R. Palme Dutt.

This was the very first time we had seen any book, other than those in our own library, about Marxist-Leninist theory, in British Guiana. Since Cheddi's return to his homeland, with me, in 1943, from studies in the USA, we had searched for someone with kindred beliefs in scientific socialism, but had so far found no one.

During the two and one half years when he had become involved in the struggle of sugar workers, we had been unable to meet any person who was interested in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

MARX AND LENIN

We entered the shop, which proved to be a printery, and which also sold a small number of books. There we met H. J. M. Hubbard. In talking to him, we discovered that he had been reading the works of Marx and Lenin and evinced great interest in the subject. We arranged for further meetings.

THUNDER

JANUARY — MARCH 1977

A little later we met Ashton Chase, who was then a very young man working with the British Guiana Labour Union, and one of Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow's most able lieutenants. The four of us began talks about Guiana and the need for some organisation and means of introducing socialist ideas in the country.

Out of these talks emerged the idea of forming the Political Affairs Committee, which would set as its goal the formation of a party based on the ideology of scientific socialism. We decided that this could best be achieved by issuing a bulletin which could reach out contact and inform people.

Thus, on November 6, 1946, we issued the first bulletin in which the following was stated as the aims of the PAC: "To assist the growth and development of the Labour and Progressive Movements in British Guiana, to the end of establishing a strong, disciplined and enlightened Party, equipped with the theory of Scientific Socialism; to provide information and to present scientific political analyses on current affairs, both local and international and to foster and assist discussion groups, through the circulation of Bulletins, Booklets and other printed matter".

On the masthead of the Bulletin, it said: "Members of the Committee: Janet Jagan, Ashton Chase, H.M.J. Hubbard and Cheddi B. Jagan" and the address was 69 Main Street, Georgetown, where Cheddi and I lived and where he had his dental surgery.

We printed the Bulletin on an old type hand-turned Mimeograph machine and began issuing it fortnightly. In it we discussed and analysed many of the problems of the country — housing, sugar workers' wages and conditions, cost of living, West Indian Federation, the octopus role of Bookers, and a whole range of local and international subjects. It began to reach out to a number of persons, but one can judge the slow character of its development by a pencilled note I made on a copy of PAC Bulletin on June 1947 — "circulation 218".

ELECTIONS

By that time we had brought in just a handful of others. In 1947 there were the first elections in many years, due to the halt brought about by World War II. Three of the members of the PAC contested those elections as independent candidates — Cheddi, H.M.J. Hubbard and

myself. Ashton Chase was very much involved in the candidature of H.N. Critchlow in South Georgetown. Out of the elections, there was negative and positive result. Cheddi won the Central Demerara seat and this helped to strengthen PAC and accelerate its activities. Also, the elections brought into PAC two stalwarts who made very positive contributions to the momentum which led to the formation of the People's Progressive Party — Ram Karran and Sydney King. But out of the elections, PAC lost H.M.J. Hubbard, who, after his defeat in North Georgetown, left political life in Guiana, not to return to the scene for ten years — when, in 1957, the PPP proposed his nomination to the Legislative Council after it had won the elections.

From 1947, events moved rapidly. Small study groups were formed in Buxton, Kitty and elsewhere. PAC's views were propounded by Cheddi in the Legislative Council and thereby gained a wider range of contact and understanding. The Bulletin was more widely distributed.

In 1948, during the long strike of sugar workers, which culminated in the Enmore tragedy, PAC members were heavily involved and made very positive contributions to this struggle. PAC even went to the British House of Commons, where one conservative member, speaking on the strike which affected British financial interests in the country, spoke of the PAC Bulletin as a publication which should be banned — "they issue a most poisonous propaganda inciting people to do all kinds of trouble — to withdraw their labour, to demonstrate against the estate managers and in every way possible to cause disturbances".

SERIOUS TALKS

It was during 1949 that serious talks began about the formation of a Party, to fulfill one of the aims of PAC. Near the end of these discussions, L.F.S. Burnham returned in 1949 to British Guiana from studies abroad and was invited to join PAC in the discussions to form a Party. He hesitated for some time, but eventually joined and when the Party was formed, he was selected to be Chairman, with Cheddi as Leader and myself as General Secretary.

The PAC Bulletin then became THUNDER, official organ of the People's Progressive Party. This was announced in the first issue of January 1950. Thus was the

People's Progressive Party founded. In its first manifesto it declared its aims — "recognising that the final abolition of exploitation and oppression, of economic crises and unemployment and war will be achieved only through the socialist re-organisation of society, pledges itself to the task of winning a free and independent Guiana, of building a just socialist society, in which the industries of the country shall be socially and democratically owned and managed for the common good, a society in which security, plenty, peace and freedom shall be the heritage of all".

At a celebration of the event at Freedom House, Georgetown, Headquarters of the People's Progressive Party, the three surviving foundation members of the Political Affairs Committee, Cheddi Jagan, Ashton Chase, and Janet Jagan, were present and spoke of their reminiscences of that period. Mirror newspaper carried this report:

Cheddi Jagan discussed the awful conditions under which people lived, and their hardships under colonialism. He referred to the strong anti-communist hysteria of the period, both in Guiana and abroad, when the cold war was in full progress.

Dr. Jagan recalled the efforts of the colonial regime to prevent the dissemination of socialist literature, and the confiscation of huge amounts of such literature. He recalled the 4½ months strike in the sugar industry in 1948, and the role played by the Political Affairs Committee which gave solid support to the strikers, especially after the shooting down of workers which resulted in the death of five. He spoke, too, of the early days, when he was a lone progressive member of the Legislative Council, fighting for the rights of the working people.

Ashton Chase, who in those days worked with H. N. Critchlow in the British Guiana Labour Union, recalled that three important struggles of workers took place during the period after the formation of the PAC. He referred to the struggles of the bauxite workers, the transport workers and the sugar workers, all of whom had major strikes during that period and to which the PAC gave unstinted support. This background of solidarity with the working class was helpful in building the sound reputation of the Political Affairs Committee and later, the People's Progressive Party.

Both Cheddi Jagan and Ashton Chase referred to the influence of the Indian Independence Movement and the inspiration drawn from the success of that struggle.

Janet Jagan spoke of the importance of the Guyanese people knowing about this early period of the political history of the country, which was being altered and falsified.

She was reminded of other activities of the PAC in the period of 1946-50. PAC at that time took a strong internationalist position, which did not change with the emergence of PAC into the PPP. She referred to the world-wide strike called by the Canadian Seaman's Union in 1949, which held up every Canadian vessel in various ports throughout the world. One Canadian ship was in Port Georgetown and the seamen joined the strike. But they met great hostility in British Guiana, and it was only the PAC which offered them support carrying supplies to the sailors whose ship was in mid-stream, when harbour authorities refused to provide food and water. Also, she recalled, when an injunction succeeded in removing the seamen from their ship, PAC gave solidarity in practical terms to those sailors who had to remain in the country for some period.

Ram Karran, who introduced the three PAC founders congratulated them on their contributions to the progressive movement of Guiana and the staunch battle they began for the people's rights. He mentioned the strong influence of Bookers, McConnell and Co., the British interests which owned the sugar plantations, now nationalised. He recalled that the country was at one time so much under the influence of this monopoly, that British Guiana was often called Bookers Guiana.