

The Significance of Guyana's Independence

by Janet Jagan

On May 26 we will be celebrating the 40th Anniversary of Independence, now a public holiday. It was not until the PPP won elections and restored democracy in 1992 that the date of Independence took on new significance. The previous government, the PNC, put all its emphasis on Republic Day, downplaying the date Independence was achieved. Few countries in this world do not give their full attention to Independence Day.

When the historical development of the struggle to end colonialism in British Guiana is examined, certain features stand out. The People's Progressive Party (PPP) has been la-

belled an "Indian" party and all sorts of slander have been levelled at the Party concerning its alleged appeal for electoral support on a racial basis. But looking at the historical aspects which led to the formation of the PPP and its advocacy of Independence, the picture shows certain basic facts and truths.

Despite all the positives and negatives, the latter includes the lies, gossip and slander of Cheddi Jagan, the simple fact remains that he was the main factor in the concept of the need for a political party of the working people, to free them from exploitation, including the need for an end to colonialism.

Cheddi Jagan's roots are well known; he came from the bowels of a sugar es-

tate, witnessed the poverty and degradation of sugar workers and was forever loyal to his roots. When he returned to his homeland after his studies abroad, his first and major interest was in the welfare of workers, and in particular, sugar workers who formed the largest working force in the country.

I was with him when this began and could see the respect sugar workers felt for him and the hopes they had in him. Most professionals on returning home, spent their lives building their practices, improving their status in society through wealth and forgetting their roots. Not Cheddi! He visited workers in the various sugar estates, one by one, doing his best to help them in their numerous problems,

being able to assess why the trade unions were not giving the representation required and then seeing the need, in the future, to have a larger vision of how the problems of the working class could be solved.

The Political Affairs Committee (PAC) was formed in 1946 with the specific intention of being the vehicle to create a mass party for the workers. That was fulfilled in January 1950, when the PPP was born. The major working class support came from sugar workers, who happened to be mostly Indian. That has been the basis of the false charges that later developed, after the split in the Party in 1955, that the PPP was an "Indian" Party because all efforts of the splitters to win them over failed.

In a series of three articles, Dr Prem Misir analyzes the period of indentureship of Indians who were brought to the colony to work on the sugar estates. Dr Misir refers to the "neo-slavery" nature of indentureship. He cites the resistance of the indentured workers throughout the 19th century when they "challenged the might of the planters' oligarchy and the colonial parliament, where each uprising, riot or discontent laid the foundations for more disturbances, and where each disorder unleashed new dynamics in their quest to undermine the imperialist stranglehold." Thus he described the resistance to their terrible conditions and the toughness of spirit of these indentured labourers, who, after indentureship ended,

were regarded as the most militant section of the working class.

It is to this background that the fighting spirit of the PPP and the dynamics that made the Party the most forward and militant force in colonial British Guiana can be attributed.

And it was in the first Manifesto of the newly formed PPP that the intention of seeking the full independence of the country was first enunciated. That is how the struggle for Independence began and was led forcefully by the PPP throughout the years.

Today we can proudly celebrate 40 years of Independence, knowing that the advantages of Independence came to full bloom with the 1992 Restoration of Democracy.