

# Remembering H.N. Critchlow

by Janet Jagan

The first sentence in Aston Chase's memorable and absolutely valuable A History of Trade Unionism in Guyana: 1900 to 1961 reads:- "The first trade union formed in our country is the British Guiana Labour Union. It was established on 11th January, 1919, and the principal architect behind its formation was Mr Hubert Critchlow."

Chase goes on to say that the Union was registered in July, 1922. He observed that the first set of rules indicated that its founders had in mind the promotion of the class struggle by organised methods. "The language" he writes, "unequivocally points to a basic underlining of the struggle between oppressed and oppressors; between bourgeoisie and the proletariat."

On May Day in recent years, tributes are being paid to the Father of the Trade Unionism in Guyana, Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow. Flowers are placed at the foot of his statue in the grounds of Public Buildings. Critchlow deserves this homage. But it wasn't always that way.

Let me relate three incidents or occasions that I recall as if yesterday. Firstly, I became involved in the British Guiana Labour Union in the 40s and used to meet with Mr Critchlow at the Union's Headquarters which were somewhere in the Hinck Street area, the area destroyed by the PNC burnings in the 60s. We were trying to organise domestic workers, but it was a difficult task and one in which we did not succeed. Because of the nature of their work and the fact that domestic workers could be easily victimised by their employers, they were hard to organise.

In the course of this activity, I got to know this remarkable labour leader and admire his views and his aims of strengthening and building the labour movement.

I also remember an incident that took place some years later, in the 50s I believe, when Dr Jagan and I were involved in a May Day March. As we progressed through the city, going through Albertain, we saw Mr Critchlow standing at his gate, watching the parade. My husband broke ranks and walked over to the gate and spoke to Critchlow using his fond nickname of 'Skipper'. It seems that the TUC had not invited him to the May Day parade and he was left out. Cheddi put his arm around Critchlow's shoulder and said, "Come along. You belong in this march."

Cheddi and Critchlow, went to the front of the march and thus Critchlow, maybe for the last time, took part in the traditional May Day parade. The labour movement either shunned him, or forgot him!

The last incident relating to Mr Critchlow was this. While Premier Cheddi Jagan in the government he headed from 1961- 64 met the kind of troubles and violence we are experiencing today, (and for the third time since 1992) he sought to prepare a fitting tribute to H.N Critchlow. He asked the artist E.R. Burrows to sculpt a statue dedicated to Mr Critchlow. This he did and it was placed in the grounds of Parliament Buildings, where it is now. But the trade unions not only shunned this tribute, but refused to recognise it and piled vile abuse on Premier Jagan as well as the artist, Mr Burrows.

I still have a letter written to me by Mr Burrowes who was bruised and hurt by the harsh attacks on him. He was such a kind gentleman. He did not deserve the way he was treated, all because he worked along with Cheddi Jagan. Does the scenario sound familiar?

This is what he wrote to me in 1964:- "I do not for one minute regard the many cruel insults that were hurled and are still being hurled at me with regards the statue, as being important once the people who matter appreciate the work."

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