

Bring Back the "Trade Union Recognition" Bill!

by Janet Jagan

It might even get into the Guinness Book of Records for being the longest controversial piece of legislation anywhere.

In 1953 the People's Progressive Party (PPP) which won a landslide victory in the nation's first elections under Universal Adult Suffrage, soon after taking office, introduced what would turn out to be controversial up to this period. It was the Labour Relations Bill which would empower workers to elect by ballot the union the workers in an industry wanted for representation.

That is really, the crux of the Bill which has created so much havoc and controversy since 1953 to today.

This description is worthy of reprint: "On the very day the British troops entered Guiana we passed in the House of Assembly our Labour Relations Bill. Employers were to be required by law to negotiate with the trade unions enjoying majority support; this support was to be determined by a procedure modeled upon that of the US National Labour Relations Act, and similar legislation in Canada. The bill was aimed at minimizing inter-union rivalry and preventing jurisdictional disputes. It included two other important provisions - one seeking to prohibit victimization of workers and the other seeking the right of trade union officials to visit the place at which their members were employed.

The Bill touched "King Sugar". The recognition of the Guyana Industrial Workers' Union (GIWU), then the unrecognized sugar union would have meant better wages and proper working conditions for the sugar workers and reduced profits for the sugar planters.

The response of the enemies of the PPP was true to form: "another communist measure," they howled." (West on Trial by Cheddi Jagan).

Of course, the Bill was lost in the events that ensued, the PPP government removed and a handpicked Interim Government placed in office. In the course of these events, the militant Trades Union Congress (TUC) was emasculated, new handpicked leaders chosen and it apparently has not recovered to this day!

Ten years later, when the PPP was again in office, but facing a coalition of local forces (the PNC and the United Force) and funded by the USA/UK governments, the same Bill came before Parliament. The TUC, led by its President Richard Ishmael who was also, the head of the MPCA Union which was challenged by GIWU, vigorously opposed the Bill, and created havoc.

Mr Burnham was then the Leader of the Opposition and in the famous consultation between him and Premier Cheddi Jagan on the Bill, Mr Burnham who had supported the very same Bill when he was a Cabinet Minister of the PPP in 1953 "admitted that it was not the causa belli, but the casus belli, not the cause of, but the occasion for, the war" (The West on Trial). He thus confirmed that the strike by the TUC, in opposition to the Bill, was politically motivated.

It was not until the PPP was again in office, in 1997, that the Bill was again introduced in Parliament. This time someone with a screw loose in his head apparently drafted legislation that would introduce the essence of that historic Bill, but screwed up some of the clauses.

Essentially, it gave the TUC too much power, which that body has abused and has made the Act ineffective by not attending meetings, thus preventing things from getting done, protecting its own weak affiliates from the "dangers" of a poll that might remove their recognition, etc, etc.

The new legislation to correct the errors of the one in operation, known as the Trade Union Recognition Bill, is supported by the major unions in Guyana - the GAWU, Guyana Labour Union, NAACIE and CCWU which have come together to get the legislation back in Parliament where it was postponed recently.

Let's hope they succeed!

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