

The Importance of the Political Affairs Committee - now celebrating its 55th year

by Janet Jagan

Fifty-five years ago, on November 6, 1946, the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) was formed. Its significance in Guyana and the Region has continued to be of immense importance. In Guyana, the meeting together of the four persons who brought this about - Cheddi Jagan, Ashton Chase, HJM Hubbard and Janet Jagan - started a process that led to the formation of the People's Progressive Party (PPP) and the struggle for independence.

The PPP, supported mainly by the country's workers and farmers, won five general elections and probably many more if we take into consideration the election of 1964 when it received the highest number of votes of any other party and the four highly rigged elections sponsored by the PNC during its 28 years of illegal rule.

During its long years in and out of office, the PPP established principles and practices that have held up through all these years. Its leader, Cheddi Jagan, set the tone for integrity, grass root activity and closeness, care for the people, high intellectual standards and concepts which scholars today study.

The PPP set the tone and standards of a political party and its relations with the working people, never wavering in its goal for the future of the country and the betterment of its people. And it all began 55 years ago.

I reproduce below an article I wrote 20 years ago on the 35th Anniversary of the PAC and published in the PPP's official organ Thunder.

"The year 1946 was the post-war period, when there was ferment throughout the world. This was the period of the growth of the national independence movements in the colonial world, which at that time accounted for a very large part of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Caribbean. No doubt the struggle in India, which was one of the most determined, best organized and most widely publicized, gave inspiration to many independence movements, certainly to that of British Guiana.

In British Guiana and the British Caribbean, the Union Jack flew in all the main buildings of the main cities. There were no visible or serious threats against British rule. What little strife existed was centred around workers' struggles for betterment and the growth of trade unionism. The centre of struggle was in the trade union movement, but at that stage, in the forties, it had little or no political content.

The idea of independence was no yet an issue - certainly not examined in writings in any form or discussed at meetings, what few took place. The concept that capitalism exploited labour was only a physical reaction to low pay, long hours of work, harsh conditions of work and harsh employers of labour. The unions were not talking about capital and labour or the working class struggle. They were talking about day-to-day problems of the workers, and were doing what was possible - that is, those not corrupted.

Four Powers

In British Guiana, this was the period when the four powers that ruled the country held it in a vice, a vice infused with the most extreme conservative attitudes and beliefs.

First, there was the British presence in the form of a Governor, whose authority was unchallenged. He was backed up by a large number of high-ranking British civil servants, who headed all the important departments. Below, were the local civil servants, educated for and attuned to their subservience to the British.

Second, were the British sugar planters, the representatives of the owners of the big sugar companies based in England - mainly Bookers, McConnell and Co Ltd. They ruled the plantations and the lives of the thousands of workers under their control. They were the "gods" who lived well, who established paternalistic practices, and who along with the hierarchy of the British civil service, were the elite. They were all-powerful because they symbolized British wealth.

Third was the Church - the Christian church, since no one gave any recognition to the Hindu and Muslim religions, although they accounted for the majority of church-goers in the country. The Church (mainly the Catholic and Anglican) had at that time, impressive powers in the country and worked closely with the British. They too formed part of the elite. To understand their importance, one has only to recall the role of the Catholic and Anglican Church leaders during the period when the Constitution was suspended in 1953.

Fourth was the Chamber of Commerce which represented local and foreign capitalist interests in British Guiana. It was a powerful force at that period.

What is remarkable about the Political Affairs Committee is that it was against this array of powerful internal and external forces that it set out as its goal, its mission, to establish a party to demolish colonialism, imperialism and capitalism; to establish an independent state of Guyana and lead it onwards to socialism!

Those were astonishing aims in an unorganized, conservative-oriented society, divided by the British in order to prevent unity, closed to new ideas and submerged in the cultural fumes of the British Council.

It took courageous thought for the Political Affairs Committee in November 6, 1946 to announce that it had as its aims: "To assist the growth and development of the Labour and Progressive Movements of 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."

In its three years of existence, November 1946 to December 1949, it worked with the trade union movement, spreading new and progressive ideas, giving solidarity, both local and foreign (sugar and bauxite strikes and the Canadian Seaman's strike in Georgetown), teaching and holding classes in Marxism-Leninism, preaching and practising internationalism, guiding working people into struggle and laying the foundations for a political party to lead the country to independence and to be equipped "with the theory of Scientific Socialism."

If the Political Affairs Committee had not emerged in 1946, it is probable that the People's Progressive Party would not have been born in 1950 or that its role would have been different.

Historically, one cannot deny or lessen the importance of the Political Affairs Committee. Its birth 35 years ago was an important development. It is in this context that the PPP celebrates this anniversary and records its importance both locally and internationally.

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