

Justice to Guyana's workers

by Janet Jagan

It belongs in the Guinness Book of Records. It took 55 years for the Trade Union Recognition Bill to become a law in Guyana. It is true, however, that the Trade Union Recognition Act was passed by Parliament in 1997, but it had flaws, unfortunately, that prevented it from performing as it was intended. Thus the 2008 Amendment Bill corrected these flaws and was passed in Parliament, but opposed strongly by the Opposition who walked out.

It all began in 1953, after the People's Progressive Party won its first outstanding victory at the polls. The PPP had formulated a Bill modeled on the US National Labour Relations Act with similar legislation in Canada, which would provide for union recognition by employees to the union which enjoyed majority support. That support was to be determined by a procedure wherein workers in the industry would, by secret ballot, elect the union of their choice. The 1953 Bill also included provisions to prohibit victimization of workers and another seeking the rights of the trade union officials to visit the places at which their members were employed.

The necessity for this Act had a long history which included the employers of sugar workers, the Sugar Producers Association (SPA) accepting the Man Power Citizens Association (MPCA) as the negotiating union. This recognition of the MPCA was challenged by the Guiana Industrial Workers' Union (GIWU) which claimed to have the largest number of members.

The SPA and the colonial hierarchy, which worked closely together, knew that if GIWU became a recognized union, its demands would be great because the MPCA had for years been what is called a "company" union, doing whatever the SPA wanted. This is the reason for GIWU gaining so many members in the sugar industry.

"On the very day British troops entered Guiana, we passed in the House of Assembly our Labour Relations Bill. Employers were to be required by laws to negotiate with the trade union enjoying majority support" wrote Cheddi Jagan in his book "The West on Trial" That was the end of the legislation, but not the struggle to have such an Act.

President of GAWU, Komal Chand, in an address last year said: "There were many militant and relentless struggles by the workers which followed over the years to get GAWU recognized. These struggles culminated in 1975, a watershed year for GAWU. Two strikes for about eight weeks in the first crop of 1975 and another in the second crop for about six weeks forced the SPA to agree to a poll on Union recognition... It was held on Old Year's Day 1975; the result was GAWU – 21,487 or 98% of the eligible votes, MPCA – 276 or 1.71%..."

While GAWU won the right to a poll in 1975, in 1963, the PPP, again in office, introduced a Bill similar to that of 1953. Although Mr Burnham had been a member of the Cabinet in 1953, and backed the Bill, by the 1960's he was Leader of the Opposition and looking for any excuse to attack the PPP. Opposition to the Bill led to the notorious 80 day strike, burnings and killings and all the horrors of that period. As Dr Jagan observed in his "The West on Trial": "Both Opposition parties (PNC and UF) whipped up their followers into a state of frenzy." It was a difficult period for all Guyanese and led, eventually, for the

UK/USA alliance, to use all methods to remove the PPP from office and then led to the 28 years of PNC rule.

So the Trade Union Recognition (Amendment) Bill 2008, which was passed recently was the result of many years of trade union struggle to achieve a legal method of determining union recognition. The flaws of the 1997 Bill were corrected, bringing on the wrath of the Guyana Trade Union Congress, because its power to act and determine when a poll would be held has been changed. Now it is no longer the organization that has the largest number of trade union affiliates but the organization which has the largest number of trade union members. (The TUC has many “paper” unions as members. This arises out of the fact that the TUC can no longer claim to represent the majority of organized workers; FITUG has argued that it represents more workers than the TUC.

No other piece of legislation in Guyana has gone through such a long period of disagreement, turmoil and rage. From being one of the issues in the 1953 suspension of the Constitution to the bloody 80 day strike of the 60's, to the continued differences of the TUC, today it is finally law to assist workers in their trade unions and, as well, conforms with the International Labour Office (ILO).

Thanks to the PPP/Civic government for pursuing and completing this law which is aimed at bringing justice to Guyana's workers!

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