

Troubled country seeks a "new political force"

by Stephen Mitchell

In a country where there's a ratio of one soldier for every 10 citizens, revolutionary activity of any sort approaches the realm of impossibility.

Such a country is Guyana. Sitting on the broad shoulder of South America, Guyana has the unique demographic distinction of having a population that is declining or, at best, stagnant in growth. The nation is also staggering into the '90s with a knapsack full of further domestic problems to carry along — a national debt of three billion dollars, a plunging per capita income and dropping wages.

It has been estimated that Guyana has the highest per capita debt of any nation on the planet. Here is an effective simplification of what international debt means to the average citizen of Guyana: "As soon as you're born, you already owe a lot of money to international banks, whether you like it or not." — Rishee Thakur, Political Scientist and PhD Candidate York University

There are two predominant political parties in Guyana. The nation is ruled by the People's National Congress (PNC). Serving as the official voice of opposition is the People's Progressive Party (PPP). Both organizations, it has been muttered, make a great deal of noise about supporting the interests of the country's Afro-Guyanese population of workers and religious groups.

Last week, however, N.K. Gopaul told a small assembly at Curtis Lecture Hall F that the Guyanese working class is presently standing alone in its struggle for the restoration of democracy.

Gopaul is the general secretary of the National Association of Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial Employees (NAACIE), an organization that is trying to herd that nation's trade unions into an effective political front. NAACIE is railing away at PNC for turning its back on the masses. But NAACIE is equally critical of the PPP which, despite its opposition to PNC, has been accused of failing to deliver the goods of its socialist mandate.

In response to what Gopaul called "governmental victimization," workers from a number of sugar, rice and bauxite (a clay-like ore from which aluminum is obtained) unions banded together earlier this year. Reportedly, representatives from the nation's business community fell into step behind the solidarity flag. On February 24, 1989, the coalition declared a national Day of Protest.

The government in Georgetown, the country's capital, was not pleased. It withdrew recognition of the Miners' Union and created a number of "paper unions" that existed only to out-vote the radical guilds during union elections.

The ruling party's intention was to starve the unions financially so they couldn't operate," Gopaul said.

Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) spiralled slowly down from the sky and hovered over the country's mutilated economy like a giant, winged ... well, I'm sure you know exactly which metaphor I'm reaching for. The IMF flapped off earlier this year, leaving behind a steaming coil of budget that saw a devaluation of the Guyanese dollar (a

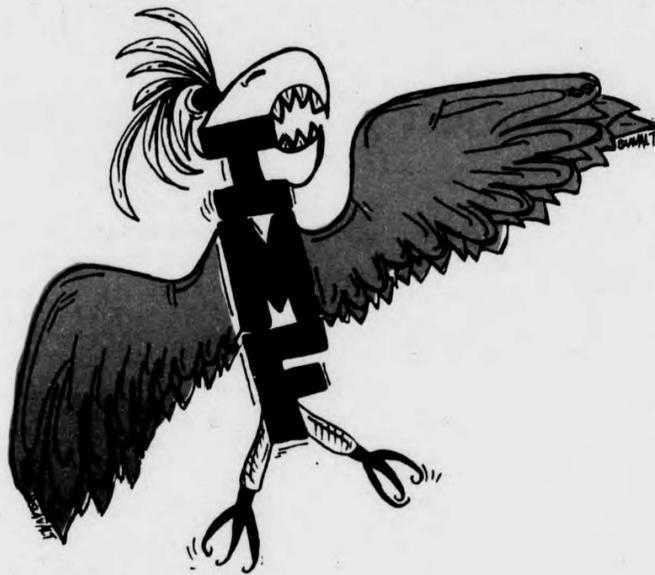
single American buck now translates into 33 Guyanese dollars), a rise in gas prices to \$40 a gallon, and a decree that there would be no more collective bargaining processes between the government and unions.

It was not a good time. Austerity, however, brought about solidarity, in the form of a 42-day strike. "For the first time in 25 years," Gopaul recalled, "bauxite and sugar workers were united" for justice and solidarity among unions.

Why has the US administration been so interested in El Salvador? The second question answers the first, it appears. In the case of Guyana, the ruling party is sympathetic to the Western powers; the opposition party is sympathetic to the social visions of Karl Marx.

Perhaps Ottawa fears the rise of a Guyanese government with a hostile attitude toward the US and Canada, should the existing government topple.

Early in May of this year, disunity among unions finally resulted



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These words seemed to awaken a revolutionary fervor in Gopaul. He made a fist, and then clasped his hands together. Carried along by this current of moral energy, Gopaul began to speak of his recent overnight imprisonment, where he shared a cell with a number of Catholic priests and union leaders.

He applauded the courage of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Guyana, who organized and executed the strike "in the face of the complete disintegration of Guyanese society." He rejoiced in reporting that donations to the strike fund came from churches, businesses and from foreign benefactors. At least one foreign benefactor, however, received Gopaul's pointed finger of accusation. The Canadian government, according to the NAACIE general secretary, supported the PNC and approved of the Guyanese ruling party's "bold" attempts to quell the strike and dampen protest. Large amounts of money have come from Canada to help bail out the Guyanese government, Gopaul said. He didn't believe any of this money was filtering down to the masses.

Why is the Canadian government interested in Guyana?

in a crushing of the strike, and a collapse of the solidarity movement. Gopaul, however, was not prepared to cancel out the possibility of a future uprising."

The workers have resolved themselves to continue the fight to ensure justice, to ensure democracy," he said. He spoke confidently of the young and old expatriate Guyanese people he'd met with, many of whom expressed a desire to return to their homeland.

Gopaul wanted to see overseas Guyanese return home to help create a "new political force" in Guyana. He envisioned a situation in which even the military would stand up for the masses to bring about an overthrow of the government and changes in the nation's political direction.

I sat in Curtis Lecture Hall F last week, looking into the faces of the people who'd come to listen to Gopaul; some students, a few faculty members. Most, I figured, were of Guyanese descent. Were they, just then, imagining what it would be like to go back home? How aware were they of the problems of their country? Once home, would they be committed to political change, or would they politely adapt to economic hardship?

Kevin Connolly, freelance writer/editor/publisher, will conduct an Arts Writing Seminar after the Excalibur staff meeting Thursday at 4 pm. All welcome to room 111 Central Square.

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