

British Guyana

Struggles to overcome colonial legacy

by Barbara deMarsh

Guyana shares the struggle of the world's newly independent countries as it strives to rescue economic and political control from the havoc of its colonial past. The full dimensions of the Guyanese struggle are suggested by Walter Rodney, a reknowned Afro-Guyanese political activist and historian, in the excerpts which follow from an interview he held in 1976. However, first, a brief description of Guyana is warranted.

The 83,000 square miles of Guyana, bordered by Venezuela, Brazil and Surinam, includes a vast coastline which covers 270 miles of South America's northwest. With only about 800,000 inhabitants in total and 200,000 of these living in the capital, coastal city of Georgetown, the country is sparsely populated and in fact, under-populated. Often labelled as the "Land of Six Peoples", Guyana is inhabited by peoples of African, East Indian, Portuguese, Chinese and European extraction, and by the native Amerindian tribespeople. The people of East Indian descent now account for over half the total and those of African descent for nearly a third. Sixty-five percent of the remainder are people of mixed blood.

The Amerindians were the first people to settle in the country prior to the 16th century. Shortly thereafter, Guyana became the scene of political contests between various European powers headed by Spain. By 1814 the country was ceded to Britain and in 1831, the three colonies of Berbice, Demerara and Essiquibo merged to become what was then known as British Guiana.

The plantations of British Guiana were worked by African slaves until 1838 when slavery was abolished. Portuguese immigrants were subsequently brought from Madeira to meet the labour shortage and were followed by the Chinese and indentured East Indian labourers.

Significant events in more recent political development date from 1953 when the first elections under adult suffrage were held. Dr. Cheddi Jagan of the Peoples' Progressive Party was joined by Forbes Burnham in mobilising the working forces throughout the country. They won 18 out of the 24 seats at that time. After the party had been in power for 133 days, the Constitution was suspended and an interim government was installed. It remained in power for the next four years.

By 1956 the party ranks split into two groups which were known as the Jaganite and Burnhamite factions of the P.P.P. Later the Burnhamites became the People's National Congress. Since this time voting has largely taken place along race lines, with the East Indians supporting Jagan (also of East Indian extraction) and the Afro-Guyanese supporting Burnham who has African roots.

The elections of 1964 were held under the system of Proportional Representation with the P.P.P. winning 24 seats and the P.N.C., 22 seats. The newly formed conservative party, the United Force, gained 7 seats. A Coalition Government was subsequently formed between the P.N.C. and the United

Force, with Forbes Burnham as Prime Minister.

In May 1966 the colonial war ended when the country gained its independence. Two years later when the elections were held, the P.N.C. had gained a clear majority with 30 seats while the P.P.P. held 19 seats and the United Force, 4 seats.

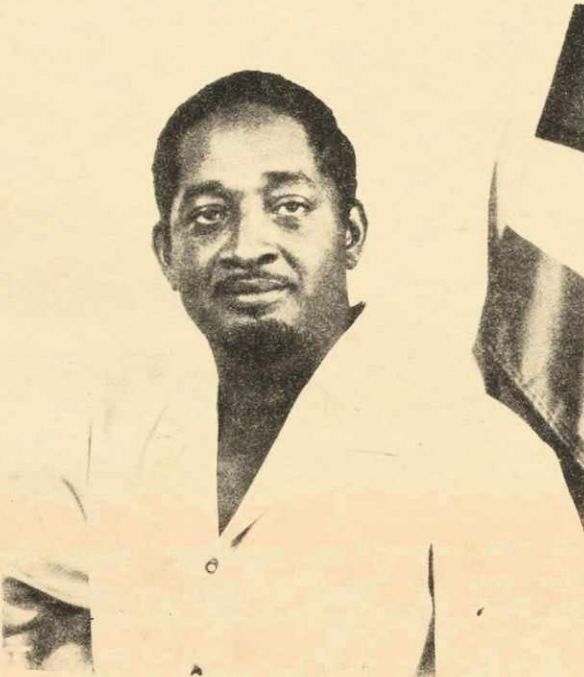
February 23, 1970, Guyana became a Republic within the Commonwealth.

From the writings that have emerged in the past ten years of

expense of the Indo-Guyanese, are widespread.

The Rodney interview was conducted by Colin Prescod, a black political sociologist and senior lecturer at the North London Polytechnic, who is currently in Trinidad. It was printed for the Institute of Race Relations in England (by the Russell Press Ltd.) in 1976.

But, speaking as a member of the Working People's Alliance (the WPA came into existence a year and a half ago as an alliance of four left-wing factions or groups).



The Honourable Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham, O.E., S.C., Prime Minister.

P.N.C. government, it is clear that the energies of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana are to be directed toward the creation of a socialist society, "competent to feed, clothe and house its members individually, or as family groups, a society that is united, self-reliant, egalitarian, culturally rich and vibrant, and economically independent" (*Guyana, A Decade of Progress*, compiled by the Ministry of Information and Culture, Georgetown, December, 1974.)

Yet, poverty presently infests the lower middle class, the workers and unemployed in Guyana, with several thousand people living below the breadline decreed by the United Nations. The economy itself, largely supported by two of the main industries, rice and sugar, is in critical shape.

Despite some of the seemingly progressive moves of the government such as the nationalization of one Guyana's three most important industries, the Demerara Bauxite Company (formerly a wholly owned subsidiary of Alcan-Canada), the government's involvement with the Small Industries Corporation and the Marketing Corporation and its willingness to help Freedom Fighters in Africa, much more is necessary to achieve true equality, social justice and economic rights for Guyana's people. Urgently needed are large egalitarian changes in the educational system, the distribution of property, resources and incomes from work and the location of powers within industry and agriculture. For the most part cultural groups seem to remain largely differentiated and cries against racist government policies grow louder. Charges that Burnham operates increasingly in favour of the Afro-Guyanese at the

Interview with Walter Rodney

Twenty-three years ago Guyana — then British Guiana — was the scene of direct British intervention to overthrow the administration of Cheddi Jagan, who is still leader of the People's Progressive Party. The PPP has always been a communist, Soviet Union aligned organization. It is due largely to the organizational, educational and propaganda work of the PPP that the political consciousness of the masses in Guyana is so highly developed today. Of course, there have been other more recent radicalizing cultural and political forces. The largest organized parliamentary party opposing the PPP has been the People's National Congress, at present headed by Prime Minister, Forbes Burnham. Compared to the propaganda platform of the PPP, the PNC has always been characterized as the dominant conservative party in Guyanese politics. So that when Burnham and the PNC were manoeuvred into power in 1963 through CIA-admitted intervention and disruption of the elected PPP government, there was widespread disapproval but little real surprise. Further, when in 1968 and 1973 the PNC were seen to rig and manipulate the ballot to get themselves returned, there was again widespread protest but little real surprise, given the corrupt and

repressive practices of the previous PNC government. In 1971 state troops were brought out to put down a protest of workers in the bauxite extraction industry.

And yet, in 1976 the PPP under Jagan is once again in participating parliamentary party in opposition. The ruling party in the Guyanese parliament is still the PNC under Burnham. The policies being energetically pursued by the PNC include virtually all those once pressed by the PPP, and some even more radical than anything ever tabled by the PPP. Before PPP's re-entry into the parliamentary system, which is had boycotted for 3 years, it had been losing members, and some significant personnel had transferred their loyalty to the PNC. So convincing are the moves to some kind of socialism that there is much talk of possible foreign intervention to disrupt present-day Guyanese affairs. Brazilian and Venezuelan troops are said to be massing on the borders. And, most ironic of all, state circles rumour that the USA and its CIA are attempting to disrupt the Burnham government which they themselves helped into power 13 years before. At first glance, all of this new era politics is surprising. But it must be remembered that Burnham began his political career as co-founder of the PPP with Jagan.

In 1966 Guyana was granted independence from direct British rule. In 1970 Guyana was declared a republic. Guyana was to be a cooperative republic, pursuing nationalist-socialist goals. The slogans of the peaceful 'revolution' have been several, perhaps the longest lasting being: 'Make the poor man a real man'. Internationally the government takes a leading role in non-alignment and support of left liberation forces. Internally, the media and public relations propaganda of the Republic is impressive. Citizens address each other as comrade. The state has nationalized and now controls the dominant foreign production activities: firstly, all the bauxite extraction industry, and then in 1976 (to coincide with the tenth anniversary of independence) the state took control of the entire sugar production industry. In order to do this it was necessary to buy-out the single most important monopoly of Guyanese colonialism and neo-colonialism: Booker Brothers.

All this has been accomplished along with significant political, social and administrative reform. (Yet when Walter Rodney was appointed to an academic post by the University of Guyana, he was blocked at high ministerial level from taking up that post. Rodney is a revolutionary socialist intellectual. It can only be assumed that he has been denied the right to work in his homeland because of his reputation as an activist.

"Cooperative socialism in Guyana"

CP: Jagan and the PPP, who were most clearly against Burnham and for some kind of socialist trans-