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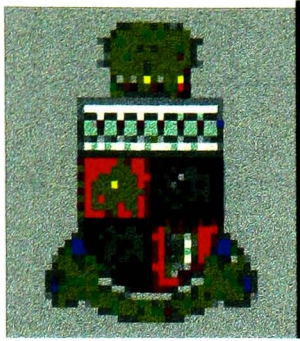
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Union Rivalry, Workers' Resistance And  
Wage Settlements in the Guyana Sugar  
Industry: 1964-1994

*Nanda K. Gopaul*

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of PhD  
in the Warwick Business School, at the University of Warwick.

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## Abstract

This PhD thesis is a study of the changing social and industrial conditions under which sugar workers in Guyana have worked, and the responses of workers and unions to these changes since 1964. It makes extensive use of original trade union and employer archives, other public and private documentary evidence and interviews with workers and union and state officials.

The narrative and analysis focuses on the experience of union rivalry and the impact of state interventions in wage settlements. The sugar industry has several different unions with differing political and ideological positions, and there have been numerous instances of union rivalry and workers' discontent over union representation. Inadequate wage offers have often led to disputes, involving antagonisms between workers and management but also between workers and their union. In practice the majority of wage settlements have resulted from the intervention of a Commission of Inquiry or Arbitration Tribunal. In the late 1970s the state's imposition of wage levels provoked numerous struggles, often of national proportions, and led to legal challenges by workers and one of their unions which resulted in the restoration of collective bargaining. Such developments have had major implications for the national labour movement. The thesis considers each of these facets of worker and union experience, and thus develops an analysis of the relationships between union rivalry, workers' resistance and wage settlements in the context of highly politicised trade unionism.

In particular it discusses the implications of trade union affiliation to the major political parties and shows the extent to which political affiliation helped to destroy the collective bargaining process. It argues that while trade unions are involved in political struggles, they ought not to be affiliated to political parties, since this is likely to compromise the independence of the labour movement and weakens the collective bargaining process.

**Dedicated to the 50th Anniversary of NAACIE-  
the champion of workers' rights in Guyana.**

**1946- 1996  
“Striving Towards Unity”**

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## Abbreviations

### Trade Unions in Guyana

AMM	Association of Masters and Mistresses
ATGWU	Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union
CCWU	Clerical and Commercial Workers Union
CWU	Communication Workers Union
FITUG	Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Guyana
FUGE	Federation of Unions of Government Employees
GAWU	Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union
GBSU	Guyana Bauxite Supervisors Union
GEU	Government Employees Union
GFFSU	Guyana Field Foremen & Supervisors Union
GLGOA	Guyana Local Government Officers Association
GLU	Guyana Labour Union
GMWU	Guyana Mine Workers Union
GMFBSA	Guyana Mortgage Finance Bank Staff Association
GNCBSA	Guyana National Cooperative Bank Staff Association
GPSU	Guyana Public Service Union
GPTWU	Guyana Postal and Telecommunication Workers Union
GSDA	Guyana Sicknurses and Dispensers' Association
GSESA	Guyana Sugar Estates Supervisors Association
GTU	Guyana Teachers Union
GWISBU	Guyana & West Indies Sugar Boilers Union

GWU	General Workers Union
MEU	Medical Employees Union
MPCA	Man Power Citizens Association
NAACIE	National Association of Agricultural Commercial and Industrial Employees
NUPSE	National Union of Public Service Employees
PAG	Pilots Association of Guyana
PEU	Public Employees Union
PIAWU	Printing Industry and Allied Workers Union
SECA	Sugar Estate Staff Association
SMFWU	Saw Mill and Forest Workers Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UAAW	Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers
UGWU	University of Guyana Workers Union

### **Other Terms and Organisations**

AFL/CIO	American Federation of Labour/Congress of Industrial Organisation
API	Annual Production Incentive
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAGI	Consultative Association of Guyanese Industries
CCC	Caribbean Conference of Churches
CCL	Caribbean Congress of Labour
CPTU	Council of Progressive Trade Unions (Trinidad)
DLM	Democratic Labour Movement

ERP	Economic Recovery Programme
FIET	International Federation of Commercial, Clerical, Professional and Technical Employees
GBA	Guyana Bar Association
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
GHRA	Guyana Human Rights Association
GLP	Guyana Labour Party
GUARD	Guyanese Action for Reform and Democracy
GUYSUCO	Guyana Sugar Corporation Limited
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRD	Industrial Relations Department
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LBI	La Bonne Intention
NCC	National Crisis Council
PAC	Political Affairs Committee
PCD	Patriotic Coalition for Democracy
PIRC	Party Industrial Relations Committee
PNC	Peoples National Congress
PPP	Peoples Progressive Party
PR	Proportional Representation
QC	Queens Counsel
SC	Senior Counsel
SPA	Sugar Producers Association
TUF	The United Force

UG	University of Guyana
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United State of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UWI	University of the West Indies
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions
WPA	Working Peoples Alliance

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Nkg

University of Warwick,

Coventry, U.K.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This research is about union rivalry, workers' resistance and wage settlements in the sugar industry of Guyana. Its aim is to explore industrial relations practices in the sugar industry and their relationship to the aforementioned themes. For a significant period of the research, the sugar workers were in the vanguard of labour and political struggles in the country. As a result, their experience allows me to address these issues both descriptively and analytically. Over the last twenty years many industrial relations activities, in particular the collective bargaining process, have come under attack through state intervention. Although the intention of unions involved in workers' struggles were broadly compatible with one another, there were nevertheless conflicts within and between them.

The sugar industry has been in the limelight of these changes and the protestation by workers against perceived arbitrary practices attracted national and at times international focus. It is for these reasons that an explanation of the national movement is given, so that the reader can fully grasp the issues as they are discussed. Additionally, background information about Guyana becomes imperative. This chapter therefore provides the information necessary to benefit the discussions in the ensuing chapters.

### **The Conceptual and Analytical Issues**

For Marxists, trade unions are basic mass organisations of workers, for immediate objectives such as better wages, shorter hours of work, and better working conditions. They must act consciously as focal points for organising the working class in the greater interest of its complete emancipation. The syndicalists according to Cole believe that ownership of industry must be vested in the community as a whole. They

reject the notion of nationalisation and denounce the state with a “determination to sweep it away” (McCarthy 1972:61) The pluralists on the other hand define trade unions in the narrowest sense and the Webbs’ definition in this regard has the closest affinity “... a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their (employment) working lives” (Martin:1989:15). In his work Flanders (1975:41) argues further that unions are not merely bodies which are engaged in collective bargaining to improve the workers’ well being, they are also involved in the processes which determine the rules under which the workers are employed.

There are thus many competing descriptive and analytical understandings of the character and role of trade unions. Furthermore the role of trade unions has over the years developed to deal with the formulation of national policies and issues of international significance. Moreover, the impact of external forces creates an atmosphere where the external social and political influences on the unions could be felt. The extent to which internal and external forces determine the conduct of unions and their national movements is still to be determined in a conceptual and analytical framework. One of the major tasks of unions over the years was not to merely serve as a partner in “a rule-making process”(ibid) but to seek to stem the tide of discontent of workers.

In almost every society, and especially in Guyana, harsh economic conditions and sanctions have been imposed on workers which continue to give rise to dissatisfaction and antagonism. And as conflict develops unions are seen very often as the main agitators in disputes and not as partners in the resolution process. In every work situation there will be conflict and it will be the task of unions as well as the other actors in the collective bargaining arrangement to seek to settle the problems with the minimum of disruption. As Hyman points out, “no social order can provide perfect harmony: whatever the institutional framework, work relations can be expected to generate some frustration and discontent and thus give rise to antagonism” (1975:202). More and more employers and Governments display a lack of understanding of the problems confronting labour. Work regulations and legislation

are designed to treat workers as if they are robots who should not express any dissatisfaction or take protest action in any manner, for if they do the “pink slip” is waiting as the final marching order.

While solidarity or secondary action is prohibited by law in Britain (as Wedderburn points out the “collective strength of workers is to be limited by the boundaries of the employment unit”, Fosh and Littler 1985: 430) in Guyana, solidarity action has not been outlawed. However, during the Burnham era, the government’s repressive actions following acts of solidarity effectively proscribed the right to strike. Historically Cole argued that intervention which undermines the right to strike or to surrender that right will result in the workers becoming “the merest wage slave” (1920: 319) while Kahn-Freund put it bluntly, that if the worker has a right to strike there should not be administrative interventions and he should be “free from criminal or civil liability”. It is a “positive right which he cannot bargain away... The exercise of the right has priority over any contractual obligations he may have incurred” (1972: 246). But more and more the right to strike is put under legislative pressures and company officials are arguing for further legislation, as is the case of Britain, “until the tyrants are tamed”, proposing to introduce laws which would bind employees to employers since collective bargaining is seen as an “inherently destabilizing device” (Hain 1986: 146). As the labour movement tries to grapple with the situation its position is undermined by the approaches of some unions, sometimes described as ‘new realists’. They parade in front of employers as if they are in a ‘beauty contest’ and accept single union deals and no strike clauses in recognition agreements with even lower rates of pay for workers. There is therefore the need for a clearly defined code of conduct debarring unions from entering into sweetheart deals with employers. This must be instituted by national movements and supported by the international union movement and their respective trade secretariats, with the imposition of sanctions against defaulting unions if necessary.

But employers, trade unions and governments should be warned that in seeking to undermine the workers’ right to strike this can produce far greater consequences for companies and the national economy. As Knowles cautions, the strike must be seen as

a “social freedom and a too ready appeal to economic necessity or political expediency in order to limit social freedom may produce greater economic (and political) evils than strikes” (1952: xii). The Guyana government, prior to 1992, tried to impose sanctions on workers and break up demonstrations and protest actions, only to discover that repressive activities on their part failed to stem the tide of discontent and resulted in a rapid decline of the nation state.

With respect to the pre-independence period, because of the system of representation, the employer and the colonial master were able to play off one union against the other, thus engaging in the game of “divide and rule”, while at the political level they encouraged the “splitting of the working class party into reformist and revolution wings...” in order to blunt “working class revolutionary ardour” (Taylor 1989: 174). While Taylor has suggested that employers under those conditions would make concessions to the stronger unions, the opposite was taking place in the sugar industry in British Guiana. The employers were negotiating with the weaker union first, and then seeking to impose whatever settlement was arrived at on the other unions.

The structure of the unions in Guyana allows the political parties to play one group of workers off against the other, ending in the complete polarisation of the movement. Some unions were more concerned with giving support and open affiliation to the ruling party at the expense of their members. The so called vanguard party, instead of addressing matters of concern to working people, engaged in acts which ensured their continuation in office. This confirms the position of Cohen that “ any state, ‘socialist’ or not, acts in the interests of state power and cannot put itself at the head of the movement of workers... with any credibility” (Boyd et al.1987: 11). While some may argue that political affiliation of unions at a certain period might have been desirable the experience in the Guyana context suggests otherwise. And as we will see, the workers themselves have advocated that unions should be independent of political parties.

Thus an important point to note about the experience of the labour movement in Guyana is that, while trade unions are rooted in work places and have offered their

members selective incentives such as seniority rights, a procedure of handling of disputes, economic and social benefits, the situation in the country allowed for the division of the movement along political lines and the emasculation of the collective bargaining process. As we will see, the majority of unions were more interested in promoting the politics of the ruling party than in defending the rights of workers.

## **Outline of the Thesis**

The thesis is divided into nine chapters, inclusive of an introduction and a conclusion. The rest of the chapter is a general introduction to Guyana and its labour movement. The second chapter focuses on the sugar industry, its development and unionism. The research methodology is also addressed in this chapter. The task of Chapter 3 is to analyse a major strike, the longest in the country's history, by sugar workers in 1964 for the recognition of the union of their choice. The resistance by the employers and protection of the company favoured union, the MPCA is revealed. The strategy adopted by the GIWU and its friends in government at that time is examined, and the division of the races is highlighted. Key statements by the then Premier, who was a major player in the dispute, are critically examined. The continuation of strikes after 1964, both for recognition and other issues, is discussed in the following chapter, drawing out the ways in which the workers expressed a lack of confidence in the MPCA in this period. In addition, the mergers and take over of other unions in the industry, as well as the winning of recognition by the GAWU, are addressed and analysed. This chapter traces the systematic reduction of unions from six to two. Chapter 5 discusses a strike of great significance to sugar workers, one for profit sharing and against a levy imposed by the government on the industry. The government's reaction to the strike is assessed and the shortcomings of the union are also analysed. This strike laid the basis for an alliance of four unions, which from time to time were engaged in agitation on behalf of workers. The purpose of chapter 6 is to examine the formation of the four union alliance, the introduction of centralised bargaining and imposition of wage increases. The resultant legal challenges which NAACIE mounted against the state's wages imposition and against subsequent legislative changes by the government are examined. The Court's ruling

against the legislation by the government and the workers reaction to the anti-labour legislation are highlighted.

Chapter 7 deals with the workers' resistance which continued in spite of repressive measures by the government and the denial of collective bargaining. Workers' reactions to factory closures are examined. The expansion of the four union movement to include the bauxite and public service unions is evaluated and the forging of solidarity between sugar, bauxite and other workers is explained. The aspect of forging unity among workers continues as the theme for chapter 8, where a major strike of national significance in 1989 is analysed. Both the indecisive conduct of union leaders and their failure to give workers leadership are examined. Can the Unions produce effective responses to the pressures of the state? Do they have the capacity to deal with the state's reaction as a result of the new workers' unity? These questions are addressed, and the lack of collective action on the part of union leaders in furtherance of their members' economic and political interests is given particular attention. Workers' feedback on major issues like privatisation is examined.

The concluding chapter in this study analyses the findings in the light of the general discussions. It argues that, while unions were in the past been openly affiliated to political parties and gave support to political decisions which were at times in conflict with the views of their members, such practices led to workers' interests taking second place. Furthermore, the resulting dissatisfaction led to the weakening of the workers' movement and created problems for union leadership. Under such circumstances, where the 'race factor' could be used by politicians to undermine the solidarity of workers especially in a politically polarised context as in Guyana, the workers' interests can best be determined by unions adopting an independent position, free from partisan politics, and seeking to forge greater solidarity among themselves.

## **Guyana in Perspective**

The outside world learnt of Guyana through a voyage by Christopher Columbus in 1498. At that time the country was inhabited by Amerindians. Almost a century later

Europeans settled in the area. Sir Walter Raleigh travelled to the territory in 1595 and his visit was followed by several unsuccessful attempts to establish permanent settlements. In 1616, however, the Dutch finally established a settlement at Kyk-Over- Al, on an island in the Essequibo River, where to this date the remnants of the fort still exist. Eight years later, a second settlement was established in Berbice. It is interesting that during the 18th and 19th century the colony changed hands several times. By 1781 the British captured the colony from the Dutch, but lost it six months later to the French, who restored it in 1783 to the Dutch. The British again in 1796 seized the colony, ruled it for six years before handing it back in 1802 to the Dutch. The following year the colony was again captured by the British, who became the rulers. In 1815, the colonies of Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice were officially ceded to Great Britain at the Congress of Vienna, and were consolidated as British Guiana. It was part of the Empire until May 26, 1966 when British Guiana gained its independence to become Guyana. On February 23, 1970 the country converted to Republican status to become the “ Cooperative Republic of Guyana”, within the Commonwealth of Nations. Apart from being a member of the Commonwealth, Guyana is a member of the Non Aligned Movement, Organization of American States, and the regional Caribbean Community (CARICOM) .

Guyana is situated on the north- eastern coast of South America and is bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by Surinam, on the southwest by Brazil and on the northwest by Venezuela. The climate is tropical where temperatures fluctuate between 65 to 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The area of Guyana is 83,000 square miles (215,000 square kilometres). Its coastline stretches for about 270 miles and the country extends inland for about 450 miles. The coastal plain is between 10 to 40 miles wide while about 85 per cent of the inland area is covered by dense forest. There are also grass covered savannahs of some 8,000 square miles in the far south of the country. About 35 per cent of the country lies within the Amazon Basin. Guyana, unlike many other West Indian countries is not affected by natural disasters, like hurricanes, tornadoes or earthquakes. The entire costal belt is below sea level and considerable sums have been expended to keep the murky water of the Atlantic away from homes and farmlands. However, many areas have been affected from time to



time as the high waves of the Atlantic overflow its embankment.

The population of the country was estimated at 760,400 in June 1995 (Guyana Review, February 1996.30) and comprises five main ethnic groups. However, the country is often referred to prior to it being independent, as the land of six peoples, which is a reflection of the multi-ethnic composition of its population. However, almost all of the Europeans departed Guyana after 1966. The East Indians, who are descendants of indentured labourers from India constitute about 51 per cent of the population. The second largest group is of African descent and comprises a population of 35 per cent. There is a mixed population of about 9 per cent, a native Amerindian population of about 4 per cent, while European (mostly Portuguese) and Chinese make up the additional 2 per cent. About 90 per cent of the people live on the narrow coast land where the population density is about 360 persons per square mile. At the national level the population density is about 9 persons per square mile of land area. The indigenous inhabitants, the Amerindians, continue to live in the savannahs and the highland region. Over one third of the population lives in the towns. The capital city, Georgetown, has a population of about 200,000, while Linden with 27,000, New Amsterdam, 18,000, Rose Hall Town, 12,000, Corriverton, 15,000, and Anna Regina, 14,000, are the other populated towns.

Guyana is a secular state and freedom of religion is guaranteed to all under the Constitution. The three main religions are Christianity (50%), Hinduism (33%), and Islam (9%). The official language is English, while an English based creole is widely used for informal communication. Hindi and Urdu are used almost exclusively by Hindus and Muslims respectively for religious ceremonies. The Amerindians have a sound grasp of the English language and have maintained their many dialects, while the Chinese speak the Chinese language to communicate with each other, but the majority speak and write English. It is the only English speaking country in the South American continent and has maintained well over 95 per cent rate of literacy since 1990. Education is compulsory for everyone between the ages of 5 to 14 years.

## The Government

The government is an amalgam of the Westminster, parliamentary and the Philadelphia presidential systems. The power to enact legislation rests with a unicameral National Assembly of 65 parliamentarians- 53 members are chosen from lists submitted by political parties on the basis of proportional representation, while 12 are elected by the ten regional councils which are chosen at the time of the national elections. The minimum voting age is eighteen years, from a register of voters' list of all resident Guyanese. The President is elected from the party which secures the highest number of votes at the national elections. S/he serves as Head of State and presides over the meeting of Cabinet. The President appoints the Prime Minister, who is the Head of Government business in the National Assembly, Ministers and members of the Cabinet. Ministers can be appointed as non elected technocrats. They can participate in debate but cannot vote in Parliament. The leader of the political party which secures the second highest vote becomes the Minority (opposition) Leader in Parliament.

The first major political movement was established in 1946 with the formation of the Political Affairs Committee (PAC). (1). This eventually led to the creation of the Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP) in January 1950. At the helm of the Party were Cheddi Jagan, his wife Janet, Forbes Burnham, and Ashton Chase. The elections in that period were under the first past the post system. The PPP won 18 out of the 24 seats. Cheddi Jagan became the Chief Minister. The British were uncomfortable with the style of Government of the PPP and accused it of trying to make British Guiana a Communist State. It sent troops and warships to the country, suspended the constitution on October 9, 1953 and set up an interim government. This event took place following the passage of the Labour Relations Bill. Burnham eventually parted company with Jagan and later created the Peoples National Congress (PNC). At elections held in 1957 and 1961, Dr Jagan's ticket won over 50 per cent of the seats, on both occasions, with 47.5 and 42.6 per cent of the votes respectively, and he became the Premier of British Guiana following the elections. The early 1960's were turbulent, as the PPP tried to introduce for the second time a Labour Relations Bill. A

general strike, which lasted 80 days was called by the TUC in 1963 against the Bill and what is known as the Kaldor Budget. The strike ended after the government agreed to shelve the Bill.

During the Constitutional talks in London in 1963, the British agreed to grant independence to Guiana but not until after fresh elections under the system of Proportional Representation (PR). This system according to Jagan (1966) was designed to block the PPP from a clear cut majority. After some resistance, Dr Jagan agreed to the British proposal and after the December 1964 elections, the PPP was replaced by a coalition Government of the PNC and United Force (UF). This was despite the fact that the PPP received the largest block (45.8 per cent ) of the vote. Forbes Burnham became the Prime Minister and led the country to Independence. Later in 1980, under a new Constitution, he became the Executive President, and ruled the country until his death in 1985 on the basis of questionable elections. Following Burnham's death, Desmond Hoyte became President and again the 1985 elections under his leadership were alleged to have been massively rigged (GHRA Reports, British Parliamentary Human Rights Group Reports, Opposition Parties, NAACIE and Press Reports ). The period under Burnham's rule was marked by the repression of civil and political rights and at least two major political assassinations took place, the killings of Jesuit priest Bernard Darke and prominent historian and Working Peoples' Alliance (WPA) leader, Walter Rodney.

As Desmond Hoyte asserted his grip on the PNC, he reversed most of Burnham's policies. He privatised several of the industries which were nationalised by Burnham and moved towards a market oriented economy. Additionally, Hoyte allowed for some improvement in press freedoms and civil liberties, thus, breaking the stranglehold the state had in the media. The tide of discontent also climaxed, as the economic recovery programme, introduced with the support of the IMF, brought extreme hardships to the vast majority of the population. The worsening crises in the country witnessed the emergence of a reform movement, Guyanese Action for Reform and Democracy (GUARD), which took to the streets from 1990 to demand electoral reforms and free and fair elections. GUARD was very successful in

mobilising thousands of Guyanese from every walk of life at several multiracial rallies held throughout the country, thus “awakening the consciousness of the dormant city to the realities of the society at large” (NAACIE Report 1992:47) . The opposition political parties under the umbrella Patriotic Coalition for Democracy (PCD) kept a degree of pressure on the regime, mainly at the international level. Both the PCD and GUARD teamed up and held a rally of important political significance to coincide with the first visit in March 1992 of Jimmy Carter, former President of the USA, to the country. As a result of the pressures from the Guyanese masses and the international community, the Hoyte regime conceded major political reforms, including the reconstitution of the Elections Commission, the replacement of its much criticized Chairman and the compilation of a new and verifiable voters list (ibid).

Eventually, on October 5, 1992 democracy was restored, under the watchful eyes of Jimmy Carter, and a group of international observers, bringing an end to 28 years (1964-1992) of PNC misrule in the country. Cheddi Jagan was elected President after his party won for the first time, with over 53 per cent of the votes, since the break away by Burnham. The PPP secured the endorsement of the Guyana Labour Party (GLP) which emerged out of GUARD. The PNC obtained 42 per cent of the votes, while the other parties received negligible support. The current representation in Parliament is as follows: PPP/Civic 36 seats; PNC 26 seats; WPA 2 seats; and the UF 1 seat. The highest Judicial body is the Court of Appeal, followed by the High Court and they are presided over by the Chancellor and Chief Justice respectively, appointed by the President in consultation with the Minority Leader (Guyana Constitution 1980).

## **The Economy**

Despite industrial instability and acts of destabilisation of the PPP government in 1963 and 1964 the PNC took over, in December 1964, what was considered to be a buoyant economy with foreign currency reserves in the treasury. The main industries providing a source of foreign exchange were sugar, bauxite and rice. However, the country is bestowed with natural resources, including gold, diamonds and other

minerals. The economy continued to show some improvement up to the early 1970s especially with the favourable world market prices obtained for raw sugar in 1974 and 1975. By the mid seventies there was mismanagement of the economy of an unprecedented nature (Thomas 1988: 255-268). The oil crises during that period added to the woes of the country. The government had also embarked on a nationalisation process which had the full support of the PPP. Between 1970 and 1984 the PNC government under Burnham had nationalised some 41 entities, representing over 80 per cent of the economy and placed them under state control. During the period 1976 to 1990 the economy recorded catastrophic decline with massive devaluation of the Guyana dollar and massive price hikes. The country's GDP per person slumped to below US\$ 400, which made this once prosperous country the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti (World Bank Report 1990).

The Economic Recovery Programme introduced in 1988 by the Hoyte regime in conjunction with the IMF and other international lending institutions created enormous financial difficulties for workers and resulted in major strikes, as we will see later. However, by 1991 the economy recorded its first positive growth rate of 6.1 per cent to be followed by a 7.3 per cent increase in 1992. The positive development for the economy continued under the PPP/Civic administration which took office in October 1992, with growth rates of 8.2 and 8.4 per cent for 1993 and 1994 respectively, while for 1995 it was 5.1 per cent. By the end of 1994 Guyana had become the Caribbean's fastest growing economy and its performance described as "way above the average for developing countries" (Guyana Update: February 1996). In 1995 gold had become the second largest foreign exchange earner after sugar. The divestment programme pursued under Hoyte since 1989 resulted in 15 of the 41 state entities being privatised with management contracts awarded to foreign companies for both the sugar and bauxite industries. The Jagan administration has listed 16 of the 26 remaining companies for divestment and has set up a Privatisation Unit to deal with the sale of state enterprises (2). It has emphasised greater public accountability in this regard and much more information is made available to the public.

Guyana's external debt at the end of 1992 was estimated at US\$ 2.1 billion of which half was owed to multilateral development banks, and over US\$ 400m or 20 per cent of the debt is owing to our neighbouring CARICOM State, Trinidad and Tobago, mainly for the supply of petroleum products up to 1986 (3). The situation would have been worse had it not been for debt forgiveness from the United States, Canada and Britain on major portions of debts owed to them. The cost to service the debt which was almost six times the GDP, is about 46 per cent of export earnings. By the end of 1992 the country's foreign exchange reserves stood at nearly US\$200m and by the end of 1994 it had increased by another US\$70m. This must be regarded as very favourable when compared to an all time low in 1988 when it was in debt by about half a billion US dollars. The exchange rate of the US dollar which was around G\$125 in 1991 increased to about G\$145 to the US dollar by the end of 1995.

The inflationary trend developed in the Burnham era was drastically reduced to about 35 per cent in 1991. With constant economic growth under the PPP, it declined to 16 per cent by the end of 1994 followed by a further reduction to about 8.1 per cent at the end of 1995 (ibid). Unemployment which was estimated at about 25 per cent in the mid 1980s dropped to about 16 per cent at the end of 1991 with a further reduction of 5 per cent by the end of 1994. This followed the creation of nearly 26,000 new jobs since the PPP took office. There was also an upsurge in registration of new companies or employers over the last thirty months with nearly 2,000 added to the list of companies (Guyana Update :December 1995).

The workforce at the end of 1994 is estimated at about 270,000 of which 35 per cent is unionised (TUC Records). The sector representing industry and commerce employed about 45 per cent of the workforce while agriculture provides 35 per cent of the jobs, with the state sector employing about 22 per cent. The public sector only employed about 30 per cent of the work force (ibid). Although wage increases in recent years were greater than the rate of inflation the Guyanese workers were still earning below the poverty line based on surveys conducted by both the NAACIE and the TUC. The so called improvement in the economy was not reflected in an overall improvement in the standard of living of the workers (NAACIE Report 1994:2). For

economic growth to create an impact it must be sustainable and not dependent on merely one or two industries as is the case in Guyana. The prosperity resulting from the growth must also result in higher incomes and overall improvement in the standard of living of the workers.

## **Overview of the National Labour Movement**

Research on any aspects of workers' struggles in the sugar industry in Guyana has to be set within the wider context of the national labour movement, and thus requires an examination of some aspects of the structure and functioning of that movement. Very often the resistance by any key section of the workforce would have a bearing on what happened at the central level. Because most of the industrial relations problems in the sugar industry have national significance, it is crucial that an explanation of the national movement is given. This point is reinforced by Ramphal who posits the view that "the history of Guyana is largely a history of its sugar industry, and the paucity of historical studies on the Guyana sugar industry reflects the great deficiency which remains in our country's historical record" (Shahabuddeen 1983: foreword). Before proceeding with the analysis of the three issues, touching on union rivalry, workers resistance and wage settlements in the sugar industry, which will be the foundation of this thesis, it would be useful if a brief overview of the central labour movement is given.

The Guyana Trades Union Congress (GTUC) is currently the umbrella organisation for twenty two affiliated unions, with a collective membership in excess of seventy thousand. There are only three minor unions without any trade union recognition, which are outside the TUC. Under current legislation any seven individuals could come together and register a trade union, once some other criteria satisfactory to the Registrar of Trade Unions are met. Since this process can be the subject of intense analysis and debate it is our intention not to be tied to a debate about such a process but to instead give the minimum of explanation of the union movement which would be helpful to understanding of the research.

## **The Birth of the Labour Movement**

Before the organisation of trade unions in Guyana, workers in many sections of British Guiana were engaged in bitter struggles with employers and the colonial government. However, the first major unrest took place on 28th November, 1905 when workers employed at the water front withdrew their labour in protest at atrocious working conditions and poor wages (4). They were followed by workers in other sections of the capital city and on nearby sugar estates. During this period there were clashes between protesters and the police resulting in the shooting to death by police of eight persons and the arrests and convictions of several others. The "first explosion of resentment..." lasted nine days without any of the demands by the workers being met. "The workers asked for something more and in place of bread, in true colonial style, they were answered with bullets. Many workers were killed. many more imprisoned, some were even flogged, and women charged and convicted had their hair cut off in addition to terms of imprisonment" (5). Instead of consolidating this display of unity the workers became engaged in internal squabbling and pointed accusing fingers at each other over the strategy to be adopted and the failure of some of their colleagues to be in the forefront of the struggle.

Again on September 25, 1906 waterfront workers employed at Bookers Wharf took strike action for three days during which the employers resorted to strike breaking methods and replaced many workers. In May 1916 there was another protest at the waterfront which was followed in June by a petition from workers for a shorter work day of nine hours and improved wages. There was no response to this petition until January 1917 when it was suggested that a delegation should meet with the Chamber Of Commerce. By this time the workers had already instituted new hours on their own -i.e from 7 am to 5 pm instead of 6.30 am to 5.30 pm. The employers resisted, resulting in a strike on January 4, 1917, which was peaceful and orderly.(Chase: 1964) This strike witnessed the modest beginning of some form of collective bargaining, when a delegation of three headed by Critchlow met with the Chamber of Commerce.



After preparatory work the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU) was founded on January 11, 1919 with Critchlow elected as its first General Secretary. Efforts to register the union when it was founded proved futile and it was not until one year after the passage of the Trade Union Ordinance that, on July 21, 1922, the BGLU was registered as the first trade union in British Guiana.

The advent of the BGLU was at a time when there were numerous problems confronting the workers. They faced a cut in wages and increases in the cost of living. In response Critchlow fought back and sought reductions in rent, among other benefits. By March 31, 1924 the waterfront workers came out on strike. They were joined by other sections including the sugar workers, and held a protest demonstration in the capital city the next day. On April 2, sugar workers from the East Bank of Demerara marched towards the city to meet with Critchlow, but they were stopped at Ruimveldt by police and were peacefully dispersed. The next day the sugar workers persisted and over 4,000 of them from the East Bank headed for Georgetown. Again the police intervened but on this occasion the workers were defiant. A confrontation took place and twelve sugar workers were shot dead with several others injured. This display of power by the colonial police forced the workers back to work the very next day, without success on any of their demands.

As the workers continued their demands for improvement in wages and working conditions, more trade unions began to emerge and by 1939 there were fourteen trade unions registered including the Man Power Citizens Association (MPCA), which was registered as trade union number three on November 5, 1937. The second was the British Guiana Workers League (BGWL), which was registered in January 1931, headed by A.A. Thorne and was involved in representing factory workers in the sugar industry, among other sectors. This union had its registration cancelled in 1951. Immediately following its registration, the MPCA began to organise in the sugar industry. Their appearance on the scene was seen by sugar workers as "...their long awaited saviour" and was an important "victory for the sugar workers and trade unionism generally" (Chase, 1964:85-90). The MPCA created such an impact that in its first five years of existence, it had enrolled almost twenty thousand workers.

By February 13, 1939, the workers at Leonora Estate went on strike over long working hours and this resulted in what was known as the Leonara Disturbance in which there were casualties. This action resulted in the setting up of a Commission of Enquiry to investigate and "report on the circumstances attending the disturbances at Leonora and neighbouring areas, which resulted in the death of four persons and injuries to a number of others" (ibid:89). Before the conclusion of this enquiry the MPCA secured recognition from the sugar planters. However, soon after its recognition, the employer made efforts to treat with the union as if recognition was a mere formality. No serious consideration was given to representation and this resulted, over a period of time in the resignations and expulsions of representatives and members of the union. Reports also surfaced that one of the founder members of the MPCA was on the payroll of the employer, earning £100. per month and this rocked the confidence of the sugar workers in this union (Jagan, 1966:61, Chase, 1964:90). Thus the MPCA, which initially had a lot of goodwill from sugar workers and many influential persons in the society, soon became an organisation derided by many sugar workers.

The West Indian Royal Commission, appointed by Her Majesty's Government to investigate "social and economic conditions" in several countries in the West Indies (Jagan 1966:62), was also in the country at the time of the Leonora disturbance. Among the many recommendations was one for the establishment of a Department of Labour and the appointment of a Commissioner of Labour. This was put in force in 1942 (Chase 1964:100). These developments marked a significant milestone for industrial relations in the country since it became possible for conciliation to take place on matters in dispute between labour and management. Just one year prior to the establishment of the Department of Labour, four trade unions, BGLU, the British Guiana Congress of General Workers, the Moulders and Mechanics Union and the British Guiana Sawyers Union came together and registered for the first time in British Guiana the Trades Union Council (TUC) on April 8, 1941 as the sixteenth trade union to be registered. Its first President was T. Lee while the General Secretary was Critchlow. The point to note was the absence of the then influential MPCA on the TUC which only had 4 out of 15 unions affiliated to it. This was a poor showing resulting in the intervention of the Department of Labour. Thus, the TUC was

reconstituted and new rules were registered on the 8th June, 1943 with the help of the Department of Labour.

This reorganized body attracted more unions including the MPCA. There were fourteen out of a total of twenty four registered unions at that time, in the reformed TUC. The first meeting was held on June 14, and the leading officers were A.A. Thorne as President, H.N. Critchlow as his Vice President, H.J.M. Hubbard as Secretary and D.M. Harper as Treasurer. Some of the twenty four unions registered by 1943 were of little consequence and by then the Registrar of Trade Unions was taking steps to strike some off the register. It was after its rebirth that the TUC became an affiliate of the Fabian Colonial Bureau and in the next year, 1945, participated in the very first conference of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) through a loan provided by the colonial government. This year also witnessed the withdrawal of the MPCA from the TUC thereby reducing drastically the total membership of workers in that body. Whereas in 1944 there were over 7,000 members in TUC affiliation as against 1300 non affiliated members, in 1945 the situation was almost the reverse with members affiliated to the TUC amounting to nearly 1,800 as against 6,000 outside the fold of the TUC.

The formation of the Guiana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU) in 1947 was as a result of the lack of confidence the sugar workers had in the MPCA. It was registered as the 49th union in the country on April 5, 1948. Its architect was Dr. Lachmansingh. He was helped by Dr Jagan, who had served as treasurer of the MPCA in 1946. Jagan resigned from the MPCA "after his failure to articulate this organisation and to make it a militant instrument to struggle for the rights of sugar workers"(Chase, 1964:126). By 1948 the workers at Enmore Estate took strike action against the 'cut and load system' and for the recognition of GIWU as their bargaining agent. This strike resulted in the death of five sugar workers (the Enmore martyrs) (ibid. 141). The GIWU became affiliated to the TUC making total membership of affiliated TUC unions nearly 8,000 compared with membership of non affiliated unions around 7000 (Ministry of Labour Reports) The MPCA was therefore faced with considerable opposition in less than a decade after its formation, with its place on the TUC taken

by its rival.

The GIWU, which later changed its name to Guyana Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU) became very active in promoting the cause of the sugar workers and "acted as a ginger group consistently advocating further improvements in conditions of work...its membership and strength never wavered between 1948-1953" (ibid:202). It was involved in many stoppages on estates including some for union recognition. There were strikes lasting as long as 39 days and a general strike in 1953 which lasted for 25 days. These struggles "demonstrated the incontrovertible fact that it had the support of the overwhelming majority of sugar workers" (ibid: 207). They will be examined as we deal with the 1964 strike for recognition in the next chapter.

The TUC earlier played key roles in hosting a few meetings of Caribbean Union leaders resulting in the formation of the Caribbean Labour Congress in 1945 at which Grantley Adams of Barbados was elected President and Richard Hart of Jamaica, Secretary. It continued to play a leading role at the national level, in the late 1940's and up to 1953 in advocating the rights of workers. Following Dr. Jagan's election in 1947 as a member of the legislature, in which he contested the election as an independent candidate and his subsequent formation of the PPP, the TUC and the PPP took joint actions on a number of issues affecting the workers. As Chase points out "...the TUC and the PPP were collaborating in their respective struggle against capitalist oppression and in their struggles to emancipate the working class" (ibid: 192). There was a cold period between the PPP and the BGTUC when in August 1951 the latter announced that it had taken a decision to form its own Labour Party similar to the arrangement in Britain. It was a crisis period for the TUC since some unions had argued that the PPP was in fact the genuine working class party. However, the decision was not implemented and differences with the movement and the PPP were quickly sorted out. What was significant was the leading role of the GIWU in seeking the formation of the Labour Party and for his action in this regard, its President Dr.J.P. Lachmansingh was expelled from the PPP but was later reinstated in the Party.

The PPP which fought the 1953 elections in the colony was successful in winning the

majority of seats in Parliament and sought to introduce a Labour Relations Bill under pressure from the GIWU. By that time the GIWU had secured massive support from unions within the TUC. As we will see later it was following the passage of this Bill that the Constitution was suspended, and the then government replaced by an interim one, enforced by the colonial masters. Both the British sugar planters and the MPCA had opposed the passage of the Bill. The imposition of a regime sympathetic to British concerns therefore, was of profound distress to the Labour Movement. However, the new administration soon began to sow division among the ranks of the TUC. It has also been established that the period following the suspension of the constitution was relatively quiet but this was not due to lack of agitation on the part of workers:

Far from it. British brutalities and persecution contained the movement and dampened much of the spirit of militancy. Some of the militant trade unionists were detained without trial, some were restricted to their places of residence and others were served with trespass notices (ibid:221).

What was also of importance was the involvement of the American Labour movement in influencing changes at the industrial and political level. Both Chase (1964) and Jagan (1966) argue that the Americans played a decisive role in bringing down the PPP government in the 1960s. They explained that their involvement started in 1952 when the MPCA, which was outside the TUC, became affiliated to the Inter - American Regional Organisation of Workers (ORIT) which immediately set up offices in British Guiana and helped to equip and fund the MPCA in its work. Some sugar workers argued that ORIT was instrumental in keeping Lionel Luckhoo as President of the MPCA when he was challenged by Nazrudeen, who was nominated by the Berbice estates, for the post (Chase 1964:207). They claimed that the conference venue was changed from Port Mourant to Georgetown and in the ensuing change Nazrudeen's nomination was held to be invalid.

The rivalry between the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) had by then become fairly advanced and when the TUC decided to attend the conference of the latter

organisation in 1949 it was clear that affiliation to the ICFTU was only a matter of time. With the arrival of ORIT into the country through the aegis of the MPCA it was easy to access the entire labour movement, and by May 1953 the General Council of the TUC took a decision to affiliate to both the ICFTU and ORIT, implementing the decision by September of the same year. From the TUC records it was clear that the movement was split between right wingers and left wing unionists with most support in the latter grouping coming from those who supported the PPP. The TUC by this time was speaking for 12 unions representing some 10,000 members (TUC Records).

In September 1953, the General Secretary, Brentol Blackman was invited and attended the conference of the WFTU and was elected to a presidium of that body. When news surfaced about the election, members of the right of the movement were furious. They claimed that Blackman's action was both private and secret and that he had embarrassed the BGTUC by his attendance to the Conference (6). Chase (1964) and Jagan (1966) however, point out that the area of concern for the TUC had to do with the British and American Unions seeking to assert control of the TUC. This serious division resulted in a meeting of the General Council in October, just after the suspension of the Constitution, and that meeting decided on the dissolution of the TUC.

In December of 1953 six unions representing 5000 members, including the MPCA but excluding the GIWU, re-registered the TUC, with A.T. Gibson as President and S.M. Shakoor of the MPCA as Secretary. By February 1954, the MPCA had a new President in Richard Ishmael, who was to dominate the labour scene for the next twenty five years. He had established very close links with several American Labour Unions and their leaders and became the prime mover against the PPP Government in the 1960 to 1963 period. At the same time, Cleveland Charran had taken over from Shakoor as General Secretary of the MPCA, and shortly after, Rupert Tello, who had been appointed by the British in the interim government was elected as General Secretary of the BGTUC. The BGTUC can at that point be seen as a body representing a minority faction of the movement. The MPCA had about 3,500 members and the other five unions had a total of 1,500 members. The faction outside

the TUC who were previously members of the TUC before its dissolution, numbered seven with a total membership of 8,500. This did not include the other smaller Unions who were outside the TUC before or after the split, numbering another 900.

It therefore is puzzling to understand how a minority grouping could have been allowed to dominate the scene, with the majority of unions and members remaining virtually dormant. The answer is brought out in the work of both Chase (1964) and Jagan (1966), who have explained the ruthlessness with which the British treated militant unions. In addition, the enormous influence of ORIT in Guyana was tied to these developments. ORIT in April 1954, organised a conference of the Caribbean Area Division (CAD/ORIT) in Port of Spain and a decision was taken to ensure that:

membership of ICFTU should be sought by national bodies where they existed, and are truly representative of the national labour movement and that every assistance shall be rendered by all affiliates of ICFTU and ORIT to cause the national body to attain the status of being truly representative of the labour movement (TUC 1978) (7).

ORIT was therefore given a mandate to assist central labour movements in the region to mobilise other unions outside their fold. Guyana must have been on the minds of the delegates because immediately after the conference, Tello called a meeting of "all democratic unions...with the object of bringing the unions under the banner of the TUC" (8). The GIWU and the Saw Mill and Forest Workers Union (SM&FWU) unions, which were close to the PPP and had maintained their ties with the WFTU, were not invited to that meeting. "Democratic unions" apparently meant those who were outside the camp of the WFTU. ORIT played an important role in constructing trade unionism in Guyana and at the meeting convinced six additional unions with a total membership of 11,000 to join the TUC, bringing its affiliates to 12 with a membership of 16,000. There was also a crucial merger between Tello's Berbice Mine Workers Union, the BG Mine Workers Union and the Coopers Union. One very senior trade union official also explained that pressure was put by the interim administration in the country on the Registrar of Trade Unions to clean the slate of inactive unions in default of the law so as to prevent them from serving as competition of unions within the BGTUC (Interview, August 1994). It was also

feared that GIWU might seek to establish its own grouping. Hence, 31 trade unions were deregistered within a short space of time leaving 44 on the register, of which there were 32 engaged in the recruiting of members.

As the campaign succeeded in bringing the unions within the fold of the TUC so too did the opposition to recognition of the GIWU as the union of the sugar workers. The MPCA was given every assistance by the sugar planters to stay on as the recognised union in the sugar industry. By 1956, Tello reported that the number of affiliates had reached twenty with overall membership of 42,000 (9). This figure increased in 1958 to 25 affiliates with a membership of 44,000. Only seven unions were outside the fold of the TUC with the GIWU and SM&FWU being virtually isolated. The campaign was therefore quite successful. Thus, the TUC became the umbrella body for the vast majority of organised workers and unions in the country. The tradition of the TUC in being anti- PPP and anti- GIWU continued unabated.

At the political level the PPP was divided and out of that division came the PNC which became a close supporter of the TUC. However, it was the workers who had their decisive say at the political level when despite the division of the PPP, it won the elections in 1957 and again in 1962. The split at the political level which created the PNC was engineered with the help of western governments including those of Britain and the USA. It was the widely held view that the Marxist PPP was too much for their liking and a countervailing force had to be created, hence the establishment of the PNC to contest the 1957 election. Throughout the period of the PPP government, up to the time of its demise in 1964, its foremost task was to see through a piece of labour legislation which would address the issue of trade union recognition. As will be seen in the next chapter it was only in 1953 during the 25 days strike that almost the entire movement had taken a position supportive of the GIWU. Unfortunately, the legislation failed to take effect following the suspension of the constitution. In 1963 it was that Bill along with the Kaldor Budget, which led to the technical downfall of the PPP.

In the 1960s the system of industrial relations and collective bargaining in Guyana



was patterned after the British system of industrial relations. The country had also developed a mixed economy with a dominant private sector. However, by the early 1970s there was a major shift in government policies, involving the nationalization of the bauxite and sugar industries. Emphasis was placed on state control of the economy. By the end of the 1970s over eighty per cent of the economy was under state control and ownership, through the process of nationalisation. During this period also, the ruling PNC had developed the doctrine of the "paramountcy of the party". The TUC which had given support to the PNC and helped to foment civil unrest, through strikes, against the previous government of the PPP in the early 1960s was always supportive of the PNC. Most of the leaders of the TUC and its affiliates were also supportive of and were members of the then ruling party. It means therefore, that based on the paramountcy doctrine, these 'party comrades' were given instructions by the PNC instead of their members on industrial issues. Many unions had also become affiliated to the ruling party and openly campaigned for its policies and programmes which were implemented, even though some were against the interest of workers.

At the same time there was the first sign that the government was likely to lose control of the TUC should there be a replacement of the MPCA, the largest union, as bargaining agent for several categories of sugar workers. The PPP-backed GAWU, which had been challenging the MPCA for union recognition of sugar workers for over twenty five years, had stepped up its activities in this period through industrial action in the sugar belt. There was widespread support among the sugar workers for GAWU. The protest actions severely affected production. The government, therefore, agreed that a poll be held on December 31, 1975 to settle the recognition issue.

Conscious that the MPCA would be replaced at the TUC by the GAWU, and the likely consequences this could have for organised labour, the government created two small staff associations in the state controlled banking sector, and encouraged other unions to falsify their membership to counter GAWU's voting strength. The poll was held in the sugar industry and as we see in the result later on, the GAWU won by a landslide. It became the recognized union and was also accepted as an affiliate of the

TUC. At the congress of the TUC in September of 1976, although the GAWU had the single largest bloc of delegates, the results of the elections were decided by the government list of candidates. The ruling party was therefore successful in its strategy of maintaining control of the TUC.

Having placed the main sectors of the economy - sugar, bauxite, rice, banking, along with the major trading entities - under governmental control, the TUC and the Government agreed to centralise collective bargaining. The parties entered into a National Minimum Wage Agreement in 1977 for the years 1977-1979. This wage immediately became a maximum wage and unions were prevented from negotiating with state entities above what was stipulated in the Government/TUC Agreement. By 1979 the government refused to implement the minimum wage agreement and refused to pay increments to workers for that year.

Four unions within the fold of the TUC, the Clerical and Commercial Workers Union (CCWU), GAWU, the National Association of Agricultural Commercial and Industrial Employees (NAACIE) and the University of Guyana Workers Union (UGWU) began to intensify their efforts in making the TUC a more independent and militant organisation and sought to woo other unions and delegates. But the PNC was not backing off and it manipulated the TUC's Rules to the fullest to maintain the status quo at the TUC level. A combination of smaller unions were given greater voting strength than the larger unions as we see in the table of unions.

In December of 1980 a Referendum was called to change the Constitution of the country and a boycott call was made by political leaders in the opposition, who were supported by some trade union and church leaders, civic and professional bodies. Although the referendum was rigged, the real support of the regime had been clearly established by the poor turnout at the polls. Independent observers put the support at between 10 to 14 per cent, with Linden, the bauxite community, having the biggest drop in turnout (Committee of Concerned Report 1978). With its support waning, especially in its previous stronghold, the four unions and the bauxite workers continued to pressure the government. It was no easy task since they also had to face

up to the repression of the government.

The bauxite workers were also taking the struggle a further stage by calling on their leaders to convene a conference in keeping with the union's rules. Once that took place, not even the might of the government could save the party loyalists, whom the workers had as their leaders. A massive shake up took place within the two bauxite unions, the Guyana Mine Workers Union (GMWU), and the Guyana Bauxite Supervisors Union (GBSU), and new leaders emerged from the branch and shop steward level. The new leaders quickly forged links with the four unions mentioned above.

In 1982 another strike hit the bauxite belt and the government response was swift and effective. It terminated the services of over 1,700 workers, the majority of whom were shop stewards and union officials. An ordinary spectator would never have understood this kind of ruthlessness emanating from a government which came to power with the full support of this bauxite community. But the die was cast. The government, having realised that it had very little support even in its one time supportive constituency, began to use harsh means to maintain political power. These dismissals in those circumstances, could be regarded as the regime's ultimate option. The ground swell was becoming a potent force as the rank and file workers were taking the initiative. Thus their leaders were forced to react to the tide of discontent.

### **1984: The Turning Point**

Early in 1984, the Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU) was contacted by the NAACIE and GBSU General Secretaries. They had already commenced work for the TUC elections which was due for September 1984. The GPSU, having indicated to the six unions that it will give them support at the elections, brought the total number of unions in the militant block to seven as against seventeen on the side of the government. Other unions were also contacted by the militant leaders and indications were that the stage had been reached for a serious challenge to be made for control of

the TUC. Although the seven unions in the militant grouping represented over fifty per cent of the TUC membership they nonetheless had just about forty per cent of the delegates. Given the type of screening which took place in the selection of delegates by the ruling party and the seventeen unions had in the past voted as a bloc, a lot of work had to be done quietly within those unions to ensure that the necessary votes were obtained. Since nominations were made weeks prior to the congress, the seven unions had to ensure that no indication was given to the other side who the real contenders would be. The result was that each union put up their own candidates and worked quietly on a slate. The voting was done on the last day of congress, a Sunday, and withdrawal of candidates not interested in contesting election was done at the time of election of a particular post.

The NAACIE had observed an infringement of the TUC Rules with respect to the membership of two of the affiliates which gave them greater voting strength. As a consequence, it applied to the High Court and obtained an injunction restraining seven delegates from attending the Conference. By the Friday evening it became clear that the seven unions would vote as a solid grouping and this created some nervousness in the government camp.

A desperate last minute attempt was made by the Government backed unions to disenfranchise some delegates. In this they drew upon their considerable experience in electioneering, rigging and scheming. And so on the afternoon of the Saturday before elections, some members of the seventeen unions persuaded a High Court Judge to discharge the injunction granted against their seven colleagues and restrained four members of the GMWU from taking any further part in the Conference. Additionally, two members of the GPSU, who were firemen but were on a long period of secondment to the union, were immediately recalled for duty, although there was no apparent reason to recall them. This meant that six delegates from the militant bloc were effectively prevented from taking any further part in the conference, hence the loss of those votes.

The seven unions could not do anything to counter these developments. The

discharging of the injunction as well as the restraining of the four members of the GMWU were seen by some union leaders as clear abuses of the judicial process. However, it was the recall of the firemen who were leading officers of their union, which drew the widest condemnation and made the GPSU even more defiant. Delegates who were workers from the seventeen unions' camp openly expressed their disgust at what had taken place. The irony of all this was that the firemen were, not long before that event, strong advocates of the ruling party. What was thought to be a clever stroke by the seventeen unions and their party soon became the single most important factor that decided the elections against them.

The seven unions received the support of independent minded delegates of the pro-government faction and won all the major officers' positions, defeating candidates from the bloc supported by the ruling party. It was clear from the voting pattern that the entire slate of the seven union would succeed, but that strategy was likely to split the movement. As a consequence, the group shifted gear to allow the election of a balanced Executive Council with a slight control in favour of the seven unions. The TUC for the first time became a truly representative body.

Following the elections the TUC tried to improve its image among the workers. Meetings were held with workers to decide the way forward. The response of the workers was encouraging and just as the TUC was about to seek to secure some improvement in wages, the Executive President called the General Secretary of the TUC advising him to warn his colleagues that they would be killed if they attempted to destabilize his Government. Police surveillance and harassment were stepped up on union leaders, as they conducted meetings with workers. The cars of Daniels and Gopaul were detained and searched during meetings with workers. This tactic was intended to throw meetings behind schedule.

Just as the situation had started to reach a confrontation point, the Executive President died on August 6, 1985. There were some disagreements among members of the TUC over the strategy to be adopted following the appointment of a new President, Desmond Hoyte. Some TUC leaders were arguing that Hoyte should be given a

chance to address the areas of concern to the labour movement, while others were urging the continuation of the agenda of the TUC claiming that the new President was a long standing member of the Cabinet, Vice President responsible for Finance and Economic Development for a number of years, and was responsible for the decline in the collective bargaining process.

The 1986 TUC elections again saw the seven unions in control but this time with a slimmer majority. The ruling party was trying desperately to regain control of the TUC and of the union leadership in the seventeen unions. Some of these leaders were softening their approach in their wage demands for workers, and the workers were responding with disgust and frustration. As a result, a number of inter union disputes surfaced. Workers in many of the seventeen union grouping (those supportive of the ruling party) were resigning and seeking membership with the GAWU and NAACIE.

The electricity workers, who were represented by the MPCA, were the first to take to the streets to demand the recognition of NAACIE as their bargaining agent. The government tried to stem the tide of discontent especially since this group had always been seen as PNC supporters. When they failed to get the workers to go back to the MPCA a senior Government Minister resorted to the use of the race card, a position they had effectively used in the past. This time the strategy was unsuccessful. As he asked why the workers were supporting an Indian Union as against an African backed Union, the workers walked away from him and extended the strike for an additional day over the racist remarks. The workers succeeded in their demand for NAACIE to represent them. The mood of the workers for change, however, did not prevent the government from continuing its quest to regain control of the TUC.

## **Government Take Over Of TUC.**

### **The Birth Of FITUG**

The government kept the pressure on the TUC Executive Council while the workers at several enterprises continued to put the pressure on their union leaders for better representation or face the possibility of defection. But to change their union would

have been a long process. Only real force such as that demonstrated by the electricity workers could have succeeded. But all the work places did not have the clout of the electricity sector workers. By the 1988 TUC Conference all the rigging tricks by the ruling party had been deployed and at the election for all the Officers positions, the PNC's slate succeeded. The amazing feature was that while several public sector union entities had experienced economic difficulties and there was retrenchment in the 1980s of thousands of workers, as we will see later, a number of the unions affiliated to the PNC had shown increased members. The 24 affiliates present at the conference registered a total membership of 80,648 (TUC Records).

Both GAWU and NAACIE submitted a much lower membership of 14,205 and 2,103 respectively as against 15,037 held by GAWU in 1980 and 3,065 held by NAACIE in 1986, while there were increases for those unions under the ruling party's control. The SM&FWU, which was defunct since the 1960s came to life in the 1980s after affiliating itself with the ruling party with a membership of 545. This union had no recognition agreement with any company and could not explain which company its claimed membership was from. It could not have come from the forest sector as its name implied since the unions which were operating in that sector were mainly the Guyana Labour Union (GLU), the General Workers Union (GWU), and NAACIE. The union had no membership register and its income did not support its membership claim. The union was admitted to the TUC in 1983 with 545 members and by 1988 it boasted 1,146 phantom members ( TUC Treasurer's Report to 1988 Conference).

The GWU in 1984 had written to the TUC explaining that "due to irregularities discovered in our union, we were not in a position to submit returns for 1981 and 1982"(10). It took the opportunity to correct its membership to reflect its true position of 2,901. The balance sheet of the union reflect an income of union dues also in keeping with that membership. The union was therefore seated at the 1984 conference based on their correct returns. Just after the 1984 TUC Conference, the architect of the change in the GWU, John Warde, the Treasurer, was sacked and the PNC once again took control of the GWU. Before the next conference that union had written to the TUC to recant on its 1984 figures and increased the membership to 8,342 instead

of 2,901 (TUC Records 1985), and it then recorded this inflated figure at the 1988 TUC Conference.

The fraud was exposed when the Union submitted an unaudited statement which showed total union dues received as \$279,000, with dues outstanding as \$701,000. The statement was prepared to reflect the registered membership but the Debtors could not have been identified nor could they have given a satisfactory explanation when challenged by the Treasurer. Further, this union made provision for bad debt on the union dues outstanding in the same account for the sum of \$400,000. And for the previous year, where the union showed outstanding dues as \$647,000, it showed \$621,935.45 as "bad debt- Union Dues Written Off" in the 1985 accounts (11). From interviews with the companies where the GWU has bargaining rights it was revealed that the membership was in fact 2,900 and the dues received were for those members. One Company official pointed out that the union always had problems with finances and would regularly seek a cash advance from the company which would be repaid when the union dues were deducted from workers. In other words, based on the checkoff system in place, the union dues deducted from workers were supposed to be remitted to the union very soon after the end of the calendar month but in many instances they were paid well ahead of the deduction period.

The other union which had a scandalous affair with its membership was the Public Employees Union (PEU) which became affiliated to the TUC in 1978 on a reported membership of 613. By 1985 this union boasted a membership of 3023 and by 1988 it submitted its membership to the TUC as 3250. The GWU was a credible union notwithstanding its membership fraud, as was admitted by its Treasurer John Warde. It had members as well as several recognition agreements with workplaces. However, there was no evidence that the PEU was an active trade union, rather than a paper union. When they were pressed in 1985 by the Treasurer and members of the Credentials Committee, to account for their membership and other records, they never did and it was established that they never had bargaining rights anywhere. This position was reconfirmed while pursuing this research, when a statement of accounts for the PEU was discovered for the year 1985 which revealed the following:



“Total income- \$8277. Total Expenditure- \$7988" (TUC Records).

There was no expenditure for wages, or any running office expenses. The balance sheet reflect total assets as \$1169 which includes cash on hand of \$244. There was no Bank account; neither was there any bank balance. When union dues for that year are examined, the lowest paid worker was paying \$20 per month. The membership the PEU claimed was similar to the CCWU. A comparison with that union indicated the following: income on Union dues for the CCWU passed the three quarter million mark and it employed seven full time staff to administer the affairs of that union. The PEU's statement of accounts shown above and its union structure have established beyond doubt that it is merely an organisation created to perpetuate voting irregularities and should never have been allowed as an affiliate of the TUC. This establishes the extent to which the ruling regime could manipulate the trade union movement to serve its interest.

This fraudulent act of a union projecting membership in excess of 3,000 and delegates based on that amount continued unabated for a number of years. It was chicanery of this nature which influenced the results of the 1988 elections of the TUC, against the interest of workers, which prompted a walkout from the Conference by the seven union grouping and resulted in subsequent formation of a second labour council- The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Guyana (FITUG) (12). There was also widespread support for FITUG among workers and there was hope that this body might play a decisive role in bringing about changes. However, the ending of a strike in 1989, as we will see later, led to chaos in this organisation.

### **TUC/FITUG Unity Talks**

With the formation of FITUG, following the 1988 Conference of the TUC, the latter body became a paper entity. The Caribbean Congress of Labour (CCL) - the central labour movement in the Caribbean - was concerned that FITUG was unable to secure membership with the CCL since the TUC was already an affiliate and the TUC's approval was necessary to allow for FITUG's affiliation. It was difficult to leave out

such important sectors of workers, especially since it comprised about forty five per cent of organised labour in Guyana. Something had to be done to heal the breach. The CCL began to make approaches to both the TUC and FITUG urging them to heal their differences and offered to mediate in the dispute. However, their offer was not approved by the TUC, which was equally anxious to get the matter resolved. The TUC claimed that they were opposed to external intervention and would like to resolve the matter internally.

The CCWU, which has many international affiliations, believed that it would have been in their best interest if the two bodies were reunited and as a result gave a clear signal to FITUG that it would like to explore ways and means for talks to commence between the two sides. Thus, while differences existed, both sides were interested in having a resolution of the impasse. The General Secretary of the TUC, Joseph Pollydore, was from the commencement of the split in informal discussions with the FITUG grouping. Just after the strike ended, and in the course of one of the informal sessions, both sides were asked to nominate a small committee to meet under the chairmanship of the General Secretary of the TUC. The decision was ratified at an Extra - Ordinary Delegates Conference of the TUC held on January 31, 1993 (TUC Report 1993:1) after which talks were formalised. The unofficial meetings between Pollydore and leaders of FITUG during the period June 1989 to October 1992 paved the way for amendments to the Rules of the TUC at the January conference.

Once unity talks began, FITUG operated thereafter in an ad hoc manner, as if it had lost the will to lead. Its rules were not observed, meetings were rarely held and minutes were never kept. It was clear that it would only be time before the confederations reunited. The workers were in the meantime left with just a few leaders, who were continuing to address their concerns. The concern over FITUG's inactivity was raised several times by NAACIE at meetings of that body. The union charged that "FITUG should not have allowed itself to be caught in the web of inactivity as the TUC, thereby losing the confidence and respect of the workers" (NAACIE Report:1992.43). At the same time, the Government was continuing to offer meagre wage hand outs, and to disregard the collective bargaining process. The

NAACIE further accused FITUG of failing to lend support to workers' struggle, despite the strike by nurses, teachers and other sectors of the workforce. NAACIE on December 19, 1990 wrote the President of FITUG, Gordon Todd, informing him that "the union had lost confidence in him as head of the Federation....The time has come when the workers will have to struggle unitedly, leaving behind them those leaders who are vacillating" (ibid:44). The major preoccupation of the majority of union leaders was trade union unity and the allocation of positions at the TUC level.

The TUC in the meantime, had concluded amendments to its rules and summoned a special conference in September 1993 with all the unions participating. The Rules catered for an enlarged Executive Council, from twenty seven to forty two members with seven vice presidents instead of three. The major problem concerning the allocation of delegates to the congress had not been seriously addressed. The only consolation for unions is that under the new rules all the unions have the right to nominate persons to serve on the Executive Council and it is from those nominated that Officers are elected. For now the vast majority of unions in the seven union grouping seem partly satisfied with the reunification of the TUC. NAACIE General Secretary, Kaisree Takechandra indicated his union's displeasure over the failure to address the issue of allocation of delegates in a serious manner. He felt that the seven unions should have ensured that the rules were amended to the full satisfaction of FITUG unions before their re-entry into the TUC (NAACIE Report 1994). Whether the unity can hold and the TUC can restore some respectability among the workers is another matter.

## **Class, Race and Politics in Guyana**

Prior to the split between Jagan and Burnham, the people of Guyana lived in racial harmony. They mixed freely and waged a united struggle for independence following the emergence of the nationalist movement in colonial British Guiana. However, the colonial administrators tried to divide the races, in terms of employment practices, by concentrating Indians in the agricultural sector while placing the Africans in urban jobs such as the civil service, the police and skilled craft work. The result was that in

the two largest industries operating in the country at that time, sugar and bauxite, the employment pattern was one in which the Africans were mainly the holders of jobs in the mining industry while the Indians were concentrated in the sugar industry. Nonetheless, some African workers from nearby villages were employed as craftsmen in the sugar factories. These employers had enormous influence on the administration of the colony, which incidentally was not made up entirely of expatriates but included a few upper class Indians and Africans. Further, some of these indigenous bourgeoisie were also employed within the middle level management of the major companies. In fact British Guiana was often referred to at that time as Bookers' Guiana. The result was a rather complicated racial picture.

The employment policies, by separating racial or ethnic groups, were intended to curb a united nationwide challenge to colonial control. Despite these attempts at division, the struggles for trade union rights, which started with the waterfront strikes of 1905 and culminated with the 1953 GIWU recognition strike, witnessed the involvement of urban and rural workers of both the Indian and African races. The combination of the races in securing improved wages and working conditions showed clearly how the strategy of divide and rule was unsuccessful up to that period. Writers like Rodney and Jagan argued that 'divide and rule' was a feature deployed in the post-emancipation British Guiana to erode the position of the freed African slaves, since the Indian immigrant was a source of cheap labour. (Thakur:1994. Ch.III; Jagan: 1966.Ch. XVI)

However, it could not have been possible that the planters developed that strategy immediately after slavery was abolished, since they tried to import indentured workers from other countries as we will see in the next chapter. But it was the Indians who proved to be most suitable. The problems with race relations seemed to have emerged following the split of Burnham and Jagan but it was not a major issue until 1963 and 1964. Jagan argued that the Report of the British Guiana Constitutional Commission (HMSO, London, Cmd.9274:1954) following the suspension of the constitution in 1953, set the stage for the split in the PPP. The Report stated that the country would continue to face 'constitutional crisis' so long as the PPP retained 'its

present leadership and policies' (HMSO op.cit:70). Further, the report argued that there were socialists in the party who were committed to straightforward and peaceful means but there was a likelihood of them being out-manoeuvred by the communists.(ibid:198-199) There is enough evidence produced by several writers to suggest that both the American and British governments engineered the split with the advent of the cold war. Because Burnham was seen as more of a democrat than the communist inclined Jagan, the former was encouraged to break away from the PPP in order to undermine the efforts and influence of Jagan and his party. (Despres: 1967; Lewis: 1968; Thakur: 1994).

The split between Burnham and Jagan was moreover, not based on race but on ideological thinking and opportunism. Let us examine what took place. Prior to the split, there were six persons (three Africans and three Indians) in the Council of Ministers in the PPP 1953 government. When the split took place two urban based upper class Indians, Jai Narine Singh (lawyer) and J P Latchmansingh (doctor) supported Burnham, while Ashton Chase, urban based with heavy trade union involvement and Sydney King, a teacher from the village of Buxton, supported Jagan. As Thakur noted:

If we take the 1953 Council of Ministers as an index of the party's leadership, then, the split can hardly be seen as a case of segmented cultural alignment and ethnic partisanship. Indeed, it would seem to reflect quite the opposite.(1994:89)

The split had very little impact on race relations at that time. Indians and Africans were still mixed in several communities and the cordiality, friendship and good neighbourliness among the races was not broken (Gopaul:1994). Moreover, Burnham continued to win the support of wealthy urban Indians while Jagan still had the support of a portion of the African workforce. On the other hand, Gordon Lewis saw it differently:

The most satisfying theoretical explanation, almost certainly, is that posited on the recognition of Guyana as an unintegrated poly-ethnic society. For the split of 1955 was a clear -cut racial division, with the PPP base in rice farmers,

dissident PNC in African elements of the working class, mostly urban workers, and the Negro middle class groups that had supported, often clandestinely, the original PPP. (1968:275; Thakur 1989:89)

Lewis seemed to have formulated his opinion after the racial upheavals in the 1960s. However, it was not until the early 1960s that the situation dramatically changed. On February 16, 1962, (Black Friday) following the budget presentation, disturbances took place in the capital city when several businesses and homes were set on fire and looted. The British Government set up a Commission of Enquiry known as 'The Wynn Parry Commission' after its chairman Sir Henry Wynn Parry, to investigate the Black Friday disturbances. The Commission (HMSO, London, 1962; Colonial No. 354) found that the violence was politically instigated by politicians who were attempting to capitalise from these troubles. Further, it was recognised that alignment to the political parties was to some extent based on race although the report noted the inter changes between the races across the political divide. The report went on to note that Burnham's support came from town dwellers who were not inclined to support the socialist politics of Dr Jagan. In turn Jagan's support came from the rural agricultural based workers. That the urban support for Burnham was not because he was an African but it had to do with economic and vocational interests. On the issue of the race factor this is what is stated:

We found little evidence of racial segregation in the social life of the country and in Georgetown East Indians and Africans seem to mix and associate with one another on the terms of the greatest cordiality, though it was clear that the recent disturbances and the racial twist given to them by some of the unprincipled and self-seeking politicians had introduced slight, but it is hoped, transient overtones of doubt and reserve. (ibid: 8)

This rather benign racial situation changed as a result of political manipulation and external political influence. In May 1962 just after the disturbances Burnham visited Washington and held talks with high ranking officials. It was then that the plot against Jagan was intensified. According to President Kennedy's advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Burnham's visit left no doubt that an independent British Guiana under Jagan was likely to create more problems for the USA than it would under the rule of Burnham, provided Burnham committed himself to a multi-racial policy. The voting pattern and

support for the PPP was assessed and it was decided by Washington that the solution was to establish a voting system based on proportional representation (Thakur 1994:172). Following intense discussions between Washington and the British Government, the system of proportional representation was introduced and the 1964 elections produced a coalition government headed by Burnham.

The point to emphasise is that while this scheming was taking place, the country was still enjoying a climate of racial stability although the situation was somewhat tense. What remained central were the ideological and political differences between the parties. Burnham still maintained his close links within the TUC and an advocate for a West Indian federation. He used these links to encourage the TUC to oppose government policies and in 1963 there was a TUC led strike of 80 days against the policies of the PPP government. This strike was supported by several influential politicians and union leaders in the USA. As Thakur stated: "The cold war provided the climate while the CIA supplied the necessary means" (ibid). Nonetheless, this remained a political struggle. Several influential Indians in the country were in the forefront of the strike against Dr Jagan's PPP government and their collaboration with Burnham and big businesses tend to give some credence that the strike was based more on politics than on race. The situation was however, slowly slipping into a racial confrontation, which became fully blown during the 1964 sugar strike. The way in which industrial and political struggles were increasingly racialised will be elaborated on later.

## **Endnotes:**

1. A full account of the development of the political movement is given in Jagan's *West on Trial*, 1966.
2. Government White Paper tabled in the National Assembly, May 1994.
3. Most of the statistics on the economy have been taken from the Guyana Statistical Bulletin, December 1994 and other documents from the Ministry of Finance.

4. For a detailed account of the history of trade unions in Guyana, please see Ashton Chase 1964.
5. Archie Codrington on Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow " The Voice Of Organised Labour" A TUC Publication on the 25th Anniversary.(1978).
6. Rupert Tello gave his account of this event in "The Voice Of Organised Labour" op. cit.pp 21-27.
7. *ibid.*
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. Letter dated 21-9-84 from the GWU to the General Secretary of the TUC with membership returns which were submitted to the Registrar of Trade Unions for 1983.
11. 1984 and 1985 Statement of Accounts of the General Workers Union.
12. Press Statement dated September 27, 1988 signed by leaders of the seven unions.



**TABLE 1.1: UNIONS AFFILIATED TO THE GTUC**

UNIONS	REG. NO.	Members 1970	Del.	Members 1976	Del.	Members 1980	Del.
MPCA *	3	16300	36	1100	6	1256	6
GLU	1	6907	17	5727	15	6018	16
GMWU	68	4881	13	5843	15	5843	15
GPSU	55	3243	10	6000	16	9519	23
CCWU	65	3156	10	4098	12	4169	12
NUPSE	124	2756	9	2048	8	4050	12
GTA	115	2708	9	3665	11	6040	16
ATGWU	5	2017	8	4018	12	5017	14
GWU	94	1800	7	2800	9	8005	20
MEU *	NA	1721	7	Merger	=	GPSU	
GPTWU	6	865	5	1252	6	1500	6
NAACIE	40	740	5	1330	6	1458	6
GEU	9	527	5	580	5	258	4
PIAWU	72	500	4	540	5	550	5
GLGOA	90	287	4	250	4	258	4
GFFSU *	36	218	3	258	4	269	4
AMM	128	204	3	289	4	179	3
UGWU	164	151	3	357	4	357	4
GWISBU *	29	141	3	Defunct	=	NAACIE	-
CWU *	NA	62	3	Defunct	=	CCWU	-
PAG *	112	20	3	15	3	15	3
GAWU	118	-	-	15076	34	15037	34
GBSU	181	-	-	525	5	1013	6
PEU	179	-	-	613	5	2513	9
UAAW	175	-	-	2565	9	4023	12
GNCBSA	188	-	-	-	-	98	3
GMFBSA	203	-	-	-	-	40	3
TOTAL		49,204	167	58,949	198	77,491	240

Source: TUC Records.

Notes: 1. \* Unions which no longer exist. 2. The SM&FWU became affiliated in 1983 with a membership of 545.

# Chapter 2

## The Sugar Industry in Guyana

Sugar is the largest sector of production in Guyana. Christopher Columbus brought sugar cane to the “New World” on his second voyage. It is believed that the giant grass measuring between 6 to 15 feet at maturity originated in the South Pacific islands (Shahabuddeen 1983: Part One). Different countries over the years developed several varieties of plant to suit their own climatic conditions. The plants are grown by transplanting small pieces of the stems into neatly defined rows. In 1637 the Dutch Authorities in Essequibo authorised an early settler in Berbice, Confrater Van Pere, to supply 2 kegs of syrup or sap of sugar, so that a trial could be made to reduce it to sugar (ibid: 10). By 1658 the Dutch West India Company founded the sugar industry in Guyana. At that time the company sent settlers to establish plantations on the Pomeroon River in the colony of Essequibo. Plantations in Berbice and Demerara were started later and by 1661 a small consignment of sugar was dispatched to Holland. The plantations made slow progress and the wars between the British, Dutch and French caused the industry to be unsettled. The estates were also attacked by pirates who would sail up the rivers, and demand ransom.

During the Dutch occupation in 1741, Essequibo was opened for development to all nations on very favourable terms, which included free land and tax holidays for ten years. This incentive attracted British sugar cane planters from the West Indian islands. By the beginning of the nineteenth century over 400 plantations had been established. The industry started to progress after the colonies were ceded to the British and by 1824 nearly 42,000 tons of sugar was produced. Under the Dutch occupation the maximum production had been 5,000 tons (Sugar in Guyana: 4). The sugar plantation has had problems in obtaining labourers from its inception. As a consequence, an undertaking was given in 1658 by a Dutch merchant, David Nassy, “to transport slaves from Africa to the Pomeroon. It is not clear whether his undertaking was in fact fulfilled” (Shahabuddeen 1983:12). However, the records of

the Zeeland Chamber of the Dutch West India Company of August 1669, revealed that a shipload of sugar amounting to around 50-60,000 pounds was in fact produced by African slaves in the Essequibo. "A fresh supply of slaves reached Essequibo in 1670. The essentials of a plantation economy based on forced labour were already in place" (ibid).

With the abolition of slavery in 1834, many of the ex-slaves abandoned the plantations which created a crisis in acquiring an adequate supply of labour. The planters had to resort to the importation of:

immigrants from the West Indies, Brazil, Sierra Leone, St. Helena, Malta, Madeira, Germany, Ireland, China and India. The Indians eventually proved to be the most suitable immigrants, and many worked as indentured labourers on Guyana's sugar plantations until that system was abolished in 1921( Sugar In Guyana: 5).

Labour shortage, competition with slave-produced sugar, and subsidised European beet sugar, created enormous difficulties for the plantations in Guyana from the 1830's to almost 1914. A number of estates ceased operations and many others amalgamated with the more prosperous ones. The number of estates had declined to 64, and by 1914 Essequibo was no longer a sugar producing territory. The advent of the first World War brought a measure of success to the industry with higher prices obtained for the commodity. But it was short-lived following a slump after the war. Estates were further reduced and relocated in the main on the coast lands.

By 1939 sugar was still a leading export and "accounted for 75% of the value of the country's exports" (ibid:6). The second World War saw a decline in production due to a shortage of labour, fertilisers and other essential products, but it had recovered by 1947 with the lifting of the wartime restrictions, an improvement of labour supply with the introduction of the payment of incentive bonuses, "improvement and amalgamation of factory operations, and the security provided by the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement"(CSA) signed in 1951 (ibid). The development of Housing schemes in what are termed extra-nuclear areas (in close proximity to the plantations) became a major venture for the industry with the establishment of the Sugar Industry

Labour Welfare Fund in 1949. The building of modern factories helped to a large extent to improve the efficiency and prosperity of the industry, and by the time of nationalisation in 1976 there were only eleven factories in operation. This was further reduced to eight, at the present moment (1995). The production figures given in chapter 7, attest to the rapid expansion and progress made by “King Sugar” since 1948.

## **The Role of Sugar in Guyana’s Political Economy**

The dominance of sugar in the life of the economy of the colony has been such that British Guiana, as was mentioned earlier, was referred to as Bookers Guiana. By the end of World War II, the sugar industry had come under the control of two British multinational corporations, Booker Brothers McConnell and Company and Sandbach Parker and Company (later sold to Jessel Securities Limited). Between them, these two companies produced some 90 per cent of Guyana’s sugar, while another 10 per cent was produced by small independent cane farmers. This was then a highly centralised industry which dominated the colonial economy.

The sugar industry, then, played a significant role during the war period as well as after independence. Earlier it was stated that in 1939 sugar accounted for 75 per cent of export earnings. By 1945, it accounted for 60 per cent of the export earnings, and 17 per cent of the GDP. In 1955, there was a reduction to 56.7 per cent for export earnings and 16 per cent for the GDP. This was in spite of an increase in production and acreage under cultivation. By 1964, export earnings dropped to 37.1 per cent while the contribution to GDP fell to 14.7 per cent. The industry, however, continued to play a major role in the Guyanese economy and by 1975, export earnings increased to 52 per cent while the GDP increased again to 30.6 per cent. By the end of 1994, sugar accounted for 26 per cent of export earnings and 18 per cent of the GDP. In addition, the contribution by the sugar industry to the revenue of the country has been enormous. By 1994, the government received a levy of \$2.0 billion, \$262 million in taxation, \$450 million in consumption tax and duties and \$433 million in tax deducted

from employees. Additionally, the industry has increased its employment since 1990 to over 23,000 workers, while employment provided by peasant farmers amounted to nearly 7,000. There are an additional 8,000 persons estimated to be employed in businesses which supply and service the industry (Guysuco Report 1994: 4).

The export levy on sugar introduced by the PNC administration in 1974 has contributed billions of dollars since then to the national treasury and helped to significantly reduce the balance of payment deficits of the country. The levy collected since 1990 indicated in the table below amply illustrates the point:

**Table 2:1 Sugar Levy**

Year	Levy Collected
1990	\$711.1m
1991	\$4.2 billion
1992	\$4.9 billion
1993	\$3.3 billion
1994	\$2.0 billion

**Sources:Guysuco Reports**

The colonial control of the economy was reflected in the pricing mechanisms applied to this dominant sector. Under the CSA, the United Kingdom agreed to purchase fixed amounts of sugar at prices reflecting the cost of production. An export tax was imposed, divided between the rehabilitation fund, a price stabilization fund and a labour welfare fund, for the improvement of housing and social facilities for workers. As a result of the capital realized from the export tax, the industry undertook the modernization programme which, as we saw earlier, resulted in a marked reduction of factories and an increased amount of acreage under cultivation, together with increased production. This rehabilitation was in part undertaken to meet some local criticism and increase its competitive position in an increasingly global economy. In

the estimation of one critic, the rationalization/modernization program literally transformed the industry:

...it has been estimated that as a result of the new investments labour requirements in the industry fell from 28,184 in 1949 to 20,480 in 1960, a drop of near one-third, while capital per worker increased from \$715 to \$950, an increase of some 170 per cent. This led to a significant increase in the productivity of labour. In the ten year period from 1956 - 1965 the output of sugar per man day increased from .046 tonne to .068 tonne, an increase of near 50 per cent (Thakur: 1994, 219-20).

As productivity rose, employment began to fall off precipitously. Thus, labour requirements fell by nearly a third between 1949 and 1960. A further reduction of about 3,000 in the labour force took place between 1960 and 1970, left a total of 17,174 workers employed in the industry. Overall, employment in sugar fell from 11.7 per cent of the national labour force to 8.2 per cent between 1960 and 1970. There was a slight recovery after the dramatic price increases in 1974, with an increase in employment levels to 19,263 in 1976. However, in the following decades, other events intervened not only to block the increasing demand for labour but perhaps more important its productivity. In 1974, after British entry into the European Economic Community (EEC), the CSA was replaced by the Lome Convention Protocol Number 3, which regulated the entry of sugar from African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries into the European Community. Under the terms of the Lome Convention, Guyana received a quota of 157,000 metric tonnes of sugar.

Two significant events in the mid 1970s served to change both the character and some critics claim, the performance of the industry. The first was the sudden and phenomenal increase in the price of sugar between 1974 and 1976. The CSA-EEC price, for example, rose from \$303 per tonne in 1973 to \$604 in 1974 and \$1240 in 1975. In the light of this increase, the government imposed a levy on all exported sugar taking a significant portion in the price increases. The contribution to government revenue, by the sugar levy increased from \$1.4m in 1973 to \$211m in 1975, an increase in its share from 1 per cent to 44 per cent for that year. As will be seen, this policy had major industrial and political consequences.

The second and certainly the most significant event in the sugar industry was its nationalization which took place in the 1970s. The main multinational operating in Guyana, Bookers Brothers and McConnell Limited claimed that the 1974 levy imposed by the government was both excessive and punitive and called for its removal. A series of public exchanges between the government and the corporation only served to harden the divisions between the two parties. The government took the view that the only solution was nationalisation.

The process of nationalization occurred in two stages. First, the smaller of the two companies, Jessel Securities Limited was taken over in 1975 at a cost of \$20 million, \$5 million in cash and the rest, \$15 million to be paid over the ten years, at an interest rate of 7 per cent. The second stage was the nationalization of the larger of the two companies, Bookers Brothers McConnell and Company, in 1976 for \$102.5 million. This amount consisted of \$70 million for assets and another \$32 million for debts to foreign lenders (Shahabuddeen, 1980). However, and despite the sanguine hopes of most nationalists, the expectation of the nationalized industry were not realized, mainly as a result of conflicts which were generated by autocratic rule, discussed in the ensuing chapters. And as tables 7.5 and 7.6 show production fell drastically, which resulted in Guyana being unable to reach the EEC quota.

The provision of housing within the sugar industry is also worth noting at this point. With respect to housing development, employees in the industry prior to 1949 lived on estate ranges and Logies built around the estates with communal facilities. Several studies have been conducted over the atrocious conditions under which the workers lived, the most revealing being the report of Dr Giglioli (1938) which made several recommendations for improvement. Following the CSA and with funds provided for housing and welfare matters a significant transformation in the housing of sugar workers took place. Subsequently, several communities were developed, with proper roads, water, sports, recreation and health facilities. These communities were referred to as 'extra nuclear areas' administered by the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Fund Committee (SILWFC) which comprised of representatives from the employers, the unions and the government. Plots of land were allocated to workers along with an

interest free loan repayable over a 15 to 20 year period, for workers to build their houses. There was a marked increase in housing development, so that by the time of nationalisation 92 communities had been developed with 12,410 house lots allocated to sugar workers. During that period also, 13,473 houses have been built, assisted by interest free loans from the 'labour welfare fund' (SILWFC Reports). The house lots which were given to workers on a 'lease' basis were handed over to them by 'title' at a promised token price of \$1.00. The PNC administration at first tried to sell the lots at a far higher price, but resistance by the workers and their unions forced the administration to shelve its plan.

Following the nationalisation of the industry the development of housing areas decreased considerably. During the period 1976 and 1994, the number of housing areas developed was 5, with 428 house lots allocated and 723 buildings erected (ibid). Unions blamed this decline, as well as the decrease in sugar production, not on nationalisation per se but on problems caused by the delirious excesses of 'party paramountcy', in which political considerations replaced demands for efficiency and productivity.

The sugar industry continues to be seen as the lifeline of the Guyanese economy. At the same time the taxation and levy have created problems for labour relations especially since the level of wages and fringe benefits remained below the poverty line. The workers have, therefore, continued to argue that their conditions of employment can only be satisfactorily improved if the government removes the levy charged on the industry.

## **The Division of Labour in the Sugar Industry**

There is a complex division of labour in the sugar industry. The tasks are provided in the four areas: field, factory, workshop and the administration department. In field operations, the bulk of the workforce comprise of the cane-cutters (harvesters), with other ancillary sections, such as the planters, weeders, pest control, shovel men, land



preparation, transportation and fertilizer hands. The cane harvesters comprise the largest and most strategic section of the field workforce. On each estate location, there are cane cutting 'gangs' (groups of between 100 and 220 workers). Each 'gang' is broken up into teams of between 3 and 8 persons. The teams are allocated work in large areas where canes are burnt before harvesting. The canes are first cut and packed in bundles before they are loaded by the workers into 'punts' (steel barges) and transported via waterways to the factory for weighing before milling commences. The workers are paid on the basis of the amount of canes harvested. The price for cutting and loading a ton of cane is determined between union and management during negotiations and the agreed rate will be applied throughout the industry. Workers would normally earn additional incentives based on their attendance at work. In addition, they are paid 'extras' for obstacles. The 'punts' loaded will be recorded alongside the names of the persons who performed the task and the amount earned, based on the day's performance of the team, is divided equally among the group.

The harvesting is based on a 'crop' system. Foreign planters used the term 'spring' and 'autumn' to describe the two harvesting period, while after nationalisation it has been described as 'first' and 'second' crop. The harvesting of the crop is very strenuous and is usually regarded as an unskilled task. However, it has been demonstrated from the 1977 strike that cane cutting requires a skill which can only be obtained through training on the job. When the government deployed scabs to the industry in 1977, their poor cutting techniques virtually destroyed the cultivation, thus establishing the importance of the skills of the cane harvesters. Sugar cane has to be harvested from the lowest point on the ground, since the juice quality (sucrose content) is higher at that point than further up the sugar cane joints. Apart from that factor, the new ratoon (plant) will die if the cane is cut too far from above the ground, resulting in a loss in the yield. A plant will give up to about six ratoons before it is necessary to replant, providing care is taken with the cutting during harvesting. It is for that reason that the industry has a target of 20 per cent replanting of the annual cultivation. Usually, the harvesting period lasts for up to 40 weeks a year. The non-harvesting period is normally be from mid-December to around the end of January, followed by a second break between April and May. The harvesters are given

alternative jobs during the 'out of crop period'. Mechanical harvesters have also been used but not very successfully. For mechanisation to succeed the industry would have to replant the entire cultivation and change the rows to suit the wheels space of the tractors. Additionally, the harvesting could only take place under dry conditions so that the rainy season would pose enormous problems.

In the other sections of field operations outside of cane harvesting, the workers are placed in gangs and many are working on a 'job rated' (piece-work) basis. As an example, some estates may operate two to three 'weeding gangs' depending on the size and geographic location of the cultivation. The vast majority of weeders and fertilizer hands are female employees. The shovel, planting, and chemical weed control gangs are all similarly structured. However, these would comprise of 'able bodied' men. All the estates have one transportation gang each, and those workers are responsible for transporting empty punts (tractor drawn along waterways) to the back lands and returning them to the factories as they are loaded. Some operators also have the responsibility for taking workers to their work locations.

The workers in the factory are employed in five sections, pre-milling, milling, boiling-house, laboratory and an electrical department. Most of them are hourly paid and are in the three categories of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled. There are, however, times when a task is given to workers on a job rated basis. The workers are responsible for the maintenance of plant and machinery in the factories and at the same time ensure that production takes place without much difficulty. The cane juice is extracted by the use of heavy roller mills and then sent to the boiling house where it is converted into sugar. The boiling houses in many of the factories are not fully automated and heavy reliance is placed on the skills of the sugar boilers to 'strike the pan' at the right time to ensure the highest quality of sugar. In this section there are the pan attendants (unskilled), the sugar boilers (junior and senior), and the process foremen. The laboratory technicians and unskilled attendants record and ensure proper juice quality and keep the grinding and production statistics for evaluation. It is from the laboratory that the estates obtain all their statistics on production, especially the tons of cane which are ground to make a ton of sugar (tons cane - tons

sugar ratio).

The workers in the Field Workshops are responsible for the proper maintenance of all the vehicles on the estates. Like the factory workers they are mostly time rated and are placed into three categories - skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labourers. Some engage in piece rated work, especially the operators of heavy equipment which is used for land preparation. Almost 90 per cent of all those workers who reach the skilled bracket, in both the workshops and the factories, are trained from within the establishment. The industry operates one of the most successful apprentice training centres in the country. In addition, all the sugar boilers are trained and qualified on a training programme jointly conducted between the management and the union NAACIE. Several of the trained apprentices have risen to the highest positions in the factories and workshops.

The administration departments on the estates consist of the wages, accounts, stores, and time keeping sections as well as the personnel department. The wages department and time keeping office are responsible for the weekly preparation of workers' pay packets. The book keepers prepare the pay lists manually up to the point of enveloping the cash for each worker so that payments can be made to them on Fridays, while the accounts sections are responsible for supplying vital accounting and statistical information to the Estate administrators as well as to the company head office. A monthly performance report for each estate is prepared by the accounts section. The store keepers are responsible for ensuring that adequate spares are available to maintain the fleet of vehicles, plant and equipment. Finally, in the personnel departments the clerks assist in the recruitment of certain unskilled labourers, keeping the records of every employee in the industry, including their medical and national insurance records as well as pension records. The estate security guards and dispensaries and their employees are also under the personnel department.

Each estate has an Administrative Manager as its head, while in each department there is a divisional manager. The Field Manager has overall responsibility for the entire field operations along with the field workshop. Under him (up to this point in

time - 1996 - no female has ever been appointed as head of the field or factory departments) there is a Senior Assistant Field Manager. Depending on the needs of each location, Assistant Field Managers and Field Superintendents are appointed. These are all senior staff (non unionised) appointments. Below them are supervisors who are eligible for membership in NAACIE, followed by field foremen/ women, and charge hands in each gang. Again the number is dependent on the size of the gang. Below the charge hands are the checkers (cane cutting gangs only) and then the workers. All the workers below the level of supervisors in the field are eligible to be members of GAWU.

In the factories the Factory Manager is the head of department. He (always male) is assisted by two Assistant Factory Managers, one responsible for production while the other is responsible for engineering. They are followed by Senior Engineers, Engineers, Shift Managers and trainee Shift Managers. The chart of each estate will determine the numbers involved. These are all management personnel (monthly staff) and do not belong to a union. Below these categories are the NAACIE categories, the Supervisors, Senior Factory Foremen, Foremen, and Process Foremen, and Senior and Junior Sugar Boilers for the boiling house. In the laboratory there is a Head Laboratory Technician who supervises several Senior and Junior Laboratory Technicians. These are all considered Junior Staff employees on the monthly payroll. Below them are the charge hands, skilled and other workers who are in the GAWU bargaining unit.

The Office and Personnel Managers are heads of the two departments. Under them are their Assistants, in the management bracket (non unionised) while in the personnel department there is also a Welfare Officer, a junior staff member who does not belong to a trade union. The other employees, Stores and office supervisors, Senior and Junior Book Keepers and Store Keepers, Senior Dispensers, Dispensers, Nurses and Midwives are all designated Junior Staff and are in the NAACIE bargaining unit. The other weekly and hourly paid workers in these sections (office Assistants, cleaners, janitors, and nursing assistants) all belong to the GAWU categories. At the Head Office only the NAACIE is recognised for all the workers below the Executive and

other Senior Staff and 'private salaried' employees. They are employed in Georgetown and at Ogle, located five miles away.

The industry at the end of 1994 had over 23,000 workers, of which there were over 600 Executive and other Senior Staff who do not belong to a union, while there are over 1,600 Junior and other monthly staff described above, who are in the bargaining unit of NAACIE. The Field Foremen, charge hands and other weekly, daily, hourly, and job rated workers, over 21,000 in total, are eligible for GAWU membership. (Guysuco Records)

### **Why the Sugar Industry?**

Initially my intention was to conduct research on the decline of collective bargaining in all sectors of employment in Guyana . However, after several discussions with Professor Richard Hyman, it was finally agreed that such a topic would be very wide, to the extent it would also be very difficult to manage within the time frame. The decision was then made to conduct research on the sugar industry, and again specific areas had to be examined given the nature and long history of that industry. In switching to the sugar industry it was felt that, because it was the major employer in the country with a long history of workers struggles, and it had experienced the application of the collective bargaining process since 1939, it provided an opportunity to link problems and issues relating to industrial relations in this industry with national events. This is ideal since the sugar industry has been the major player on the industrial relations scene. As the research established, that over 90 per cent of all strikes in the country before, during, and after the thirty year period, took place in this industry.

The well established collective bargaining process which has been introduced and developed over the years allowed for issues affecting the parties to be ventilated at the highest level where disputes are normally resolved. It is for this reason that this industry has had more Commissions of Enquiries and Arbitration tribunals than any other industry in the country dealing with almost every facet of industrial relations.

Some disputes which have arisen were subjected to legislative as well as judicial review and have affected industrial relations at the national level. It is for this reason that an analysis of some of the issues involved could be linked with what transpired at the national level and help the research to focus at times on national events.

The additional consideration is that an analysis of industrial relations practices in the sugar industry has not been done in any detailed manner. Guyanese work on the contemporary sugar industry has more of a historic and economic focus. The work of Chase (1964) highlights the growth and development of the trade unions up to 1964, with important events and struggles of Guyanese workers, including sugar workers documented. The account by Jagan (1966) explains some major struggles of the sugar workers, highlights their poor working conditions and weak representation offered by the MPCA. His focus was to show how his government was destabilized by Western powers with the support of many unions and their officials in Guyana. This account also reflects his stewardship as a politician and public official. Both of these texts will have to be examined in the context that the authors were active players on the scene and parties to many disputes. They nevertheless provide useful background information about certain events in that period of the country's history. However, with respect to Jagan's interpretation of the 1964 strike and racial events of that period, this research has regrettably to take issue on these matters with the senior statesman.

The work of Thakur (1994) focuses on a more directly political analysis up to the period ending 1965. It is useful, however, in documenting some features of political developments which had industrial relations repercussions. In particular Thakur interviewed leading members of the PPP during that period, including the Deputy Leader, B.H Benn, and Moses Bhagwan, Chairman of the youth section, and they confirmed that influential wings of the party have advocated racism to the extent of calls for partition of the country. At the same time they refused to support independence under the PNC in 1966. These positions and subsequent disagreements led to their resignation as well as the alienation of influential black leaders in several communities.

The writing by Shahabuddeen (1983) traces the introduction, growth, exploitation, marketing and management of the sugar industry. It examined the supply of labour from slavery, indentureship to the pre- independence period. In a detailed manner the author records the negotiations and processes leading to the nationalisation of the industry. On the other hand, Thomas (1984) deals with the economic aspect of the industry, and its exploitative and oppressive nature which continued after nationalisation. He was in fact very critical of the continued mode of production based on the plantation system after nationalisation and argued that the process was merely one of change in ownership, which did not move beyond that point.

Industrial relations research is a rare feature in the Caribbean and it is hoped that this work will stimulate further research and discussions. As was indicated above, the period up to 1964 was covered in the work of both Chase and Jagan. While the challenge of the MPCA by the GAWU dates back as far as the 1940s, the intensification of that struggle took place in 1964 at the time when the PPP was in government. It was therefore an appropriate period to start an analysis of union rivalry, since this is one of the main themes which the thesis is addressing. There was a change in Government in 1964 and two years later independence was granted to the country.

The processes of nationalisation, undemocratic rule, denial of the right to free collective bargaining, and wage imposition all took place over the period of post-independence history which pre-dated the restoration of democracy in 1992. During this period the assaults on the industrial relations system raised the level of consciousness of the workers and this is captured in the analysis which focuses on this critical phase. Also a once united trade union movement became fragmented, both as a result of inactivity on the part of some leaders and militant action on the part of workers, and again this is a focus of my analysis. The restoration of democracy in 1992, with the reintroduction to some extent of the collective bargaining process and a semblance of unity in the union movement, has since brought further important changes which I have also sought to address and analyse.

Overall, the thesis seeks to establish that, during this period between 1966 and 1992 industrial relations had been systematically marginalised under a political directorate and a political agenda. An attempt has been made to document the changes which have taken place over the years and examine the challenges facing the union movement. The different changes in industrial relations through political intervention within the period 1964-1994 allow for an assessment of workers reaction to those changes which have occurred and the interviews with them gave a clear indication as to where their loyalties lie.

## **The Research Methodology and Data Collection Process**

This research is restricted to an analysis of union rivalry, workers' resistance and wage settlements in the sugar industry of Guyana for the period 1964 to 1994. The research is based on documentary analysis and interviews, but is also informed by my own experience. In all 109 persons have been interviewed over a period of five months. They comprised thirteen Union officials and ex-Union officials (five of whom are now based in the United States of America), three Ministry of Labour officers, seven management personnel (six from estates and one from the Head Office) and eighty two workers' representatives or former representatives. Three leading members of the business community and a former Minister in the PNC regime have also expressed their views on some aspects of the research. The interviews with the workers were conducted with a number of shop stewards and employees on all the eight Guysuco locations. The most senior employees were selected in the unionized categories, and overall the workers' years of service in the industry ranged from thirty to eighteen years. Seventeen of those interviewed belong to the staff union, NAACIE, while the other sixty five are members of the GAWU, of which eight were members of the former field foremen union.

### **Interviews with Workers**

The interviews with workers' representatives were conducted in the months of August, September, October and the first half of November 1994. The Union,



management and Ministry of Labour Officials were also interviewed in October and November 1994, while the five ex-union officials in the USA were interviewed in April 1995. Initially, I tried to get the workers at the LBI location, where I worked between 1969 and 1977, to fill out a questionnaire, since I was well known to almost everyone there. I was, however, unable to get them to fulfil my request, since many claimed that they had left school many years ago and had given up the pen. Their tools were "their forks, cutlasses, shovels and spray cans". They were willing therefore to answer any questions but made it clear that they would write nothing. A few asked in a jovial manner if I wanted to steal their votes at the next elections. Many Guyanese have become apprehensive in signing or writing on any document for fear that they will lose their right to vote. This fear developed during the rigged elections under the previous regime prior to the October 1992 general elections when many voters had been disenfranchised through allegations that they had already voted by proxy. This fear has virtually disappeared since the last elections. However, it is still difficult to get workers to fill out written questionnaires especially those working in the agricultural sector. Other previous attempts to even get teachers and public servants to fill out questionnaires failed because of the political fear which had gripped the society.

I therefore, decided to proceed with interviews instead of using any questionnaire and to start with the foremen, six of whom had been representatives of the defunct Guyana Field Foremen and Supervisors Union ( GF&SU). This was followed by separate interviews of the NAACIE and GAWU members with each of the groups interviewed on weekends on the Berbice Estates. All the NAACIE members are either members of the Executive Council or Branch representatives. I must confess that I was not too happy in conducting interviews with these workers, many of whom had over twenty years service in the industry and the remainder just under twenty years. NAACIE members are close knit and over the last twenty five years I served as Chairman of the LBI Branch, and at the national level as Treasurer, General Secretary, General President, and Consultant to this union.

It was because of my relationship over these years, particularly during the period

1979 to 1989 when I served as General Secretary of the Union, that I feared that interviewing my comrades would have been an act in futility, that they would all tell me what they believed I wanted to hear. I toyed with the idea of interviewing the junior members but again they would not know the industry as their more senior brothers and sisters and in any event they too have become part of the struggle. Conscious of this dilemma I proceeded with an abundance of caution to question these seasoned campaigners.

Related issues arose in my discussions with the GAWU members I interviewed at a variety of field and factory locations, since they were members of a union which has been both a co-operator and a competitor with NAACIE but has had a long political affiliation with the PPP. At one of the five Berbice locations where I talked to GAWU members the discussions started with a degree of hostility towards me, because I was challenged by two seasoned representatives, who are also very committed activists of the PPP. I had to clarify my position at a political level. They asked their other colleagues if they were not in agreement with them and with some coercion they all agreed. Further, they emphasised that the only reason why they were entertaining me was because I gave my support at the last elections "to the ole man". On a few other locations I had to give reasons why I disagreed with the GAWU during the 1989 strike. This was vintage politics from a group of workers who really understand struggle on both fronts - on both the political and the industrial level.

After I had cleared the air on my role in the 1989 strike, which had brought me to a head-on confrontation with the "Comrade Leader", the majority were satisfied and we proceeded quite nicely. In fact I received a tremendous amount of sympathy from almost all of the representatives at the Berbice locations, who intermittently, changed the discussions to say how sorry they were, but they were fed the wrong information "that you a fight the ole man to put the PNC back in power". They were very free and were speaking with ease. The positions which such representatives took on the range of issues discussed in this research are reported in the narrative discussion at the points where their comments and recollections are most pertinent. This was believed to be an appropriate method of reporting the interview findings, rather than grouping

them in a single chapter, because it placed workers recollections and reactions in their historical contexts and enriched the account of developments at key points in my overall narrative..

Where applicable the views of the other interviewees have also been reported. Apart from the General Secretary of NAACIE all the other union, company and former government officials have expressed the desire to remain anonymous. The Ministry of Labour officials are still functioning with the fear that the decisions of the politicians in power cannot be openly criticised. Nevertheless, at all times they tried to be as professional as is expected of persons holding such high office.

### **Breakdown of Workers’ Representatives Interviewed**

**Table 2 .2**

Estate	Field	Factory	Foremen	Total	NAACIE
Skeldon	5	2	1	8	2
Albion	5	2	1	8	2
Rose Hall	5	2	1	8	2
Blairmont	5	2	1	8	2
Enmore	4	3	1	8	2
LBI	5	2	1	8	2
Wales	6	2	1	9	2
Uitvlugt	5	2	1	8	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>17</b>

### **Documentary Sources**

One very disturbing feature has been the lack of priority being given by organisations in Guyana to the keeping of historical records. Even the national archives are in a shambles. It is hoped that the debate now taking place in resiting the archives and

appointing adequate and trained staff will materialise very soon. This should be given utmost consideration by the fledging democracy. The much talked about national museum for the sugar industry ought to be supplemented with the idea of having an historical library for the sugar industry for the benefit of researchers. It is a tragedy that useful historical records on industrial relations matters perished in a fire which gutted the Sugar Producers Association Building in the 1980s.

The Man Power Citizens Association (MPCA), the third oldest union, which dominated the labour scene with lots of controversy for over fifty years has, unfortunately, been unable to provide any help or documentary evidence in this research. After losing to GAWU in sugar it succumbed to NAACIE at the electricity corporation in 1990 and died because of non-performance. The main leaders who dominated the scene for over a quarter of a century, President Ishmael and General Secretary Charran both passed away around the same time that the Union was gasping its last breath. Since the loss of recognition in the sugar industry, the union went into disarray and most of its records were thrown into the garbage heaps after the offices in Hadfield Street had been sold, allegedly through illegal means, to a prominent businessman (1). However, a lot of my information on the sugar industry was secured from the offices of NAACIE and the Ministry of Labour. Efforts are currently in place by the Chief Labour Officer to make the library at the Ministry operational once again. Years of neglect and the change of venue resulted in very useful documents being found in roach infested jute bags. It was an unpleasant experience but the useful strike data and other records which were retrieved made the exercise worthwhile. The GHRA library and the TUC secretariat made available lots of useful information in reports, letters and newspaper clippings. Other individuals connected with trade unionism made valuable reports on the sugar industry available, while the Public Records Office in London provided useful records in reports of historical importance on Guyana.

### **The Researcher as Active Participant**

There is no fixed rule in the conduct of social sciences research especially one that is

based on qualitative methods. The participant observation technique, although unique in itself, has been employed by certain researchers in situations where other well-defined research techniques are not applicable. However, some researchers have used unstructured interviews to allow the 'client' some latitude to ramble along with the hope that the areas of interest can be brought out at some stage. (Bryman 1988:46) In the case of Guyana it was explained earlier that workers were apprehensive in filling out questionnaires and as a consequence it was believed that unstructured interviews was the best option. A factor of significance which has to be mentioned here was the researcher's lengthy involvement as an official of the NAACIE which brought him into contact with and provided him with background knowledge of some of the interviewees. It would seem that as an active participant, this would create limitations as well as derive some advantages.

There is currently a debate about the problems and possibilities of research as an active participant, but like all research there is not a single way of approaching this issue. However, one point which should be made is that the research for this thesis was conducted at a time when I was no longer an active participant in industrial relations in Guyana. I was no longer on the Executive Council of the union and I had been away on leave from the union for quite some time. This allowed me time to reflect on the issues at a broader level, drawing from my experiences but informed by documentary evidence and the views obtained from the cross section of the interviewees.

A critical advantage of conducting the research as an insider, albeit one who was out of the industry at the time of the research, was the framework of knowledge and understanding that I brought with me. I 'knew' of many events in the industry because I had been involved in many of them or because I had been told by others older than me and who had participated in these events. As an activist I had a particular understanding of the issues, albeit from a developed political perspective. This provided me with a way of looking at events and historical accounts of the industry.

The danger is that I might deploy this understanding and knowledge in partisan ways.

Where possible I have cross checked the narrative I present, with documents, interviews, reflection and discussion. While this does not guarantee dispassion in presenting this account, I have consciously attempted to consider different interpretations and ways of understanding the events reported in this thesis.

It can also be argued that, in being familiar to the interviewees, I was likely to get responses which those interviewed thought I would like to hear. However, this was not the case, since sugar workers have been known over the years to act and speak independently and freely. The records in the ensuing chapters show the extent to which these workers have defied the leaders of unions, even those whom they have elected, to pursue their independent course of action. In as much as I was familiar to many of the representatives, and worked among some of them, they still refused to break their tradition in not filling out the questionnaire. Further, I had to interview them on their terms and I was even required to explain my role when I had clashed with their political and trade union leaders in one of their struggles, before I was given an opportunity to interview some of them.

With respect to the NAACIE members, while there was an initial apprehension about interviewing the senior ones known personally to me, the tradition of NAACIE members challenging their Executives and their direct involvement in grassroots unionism, allowed them a freedom in answering questions. Their responses and their criticisms of their own leaders on matters pertaining to negotiations, demonstrated their 'free thinking' approach in dealing with the interviewer.

Further, on the positive side, if the researcher had been from outside the union movement, it would have been unlikely that the documentation, including letters, union reports, and minutes, would have been made available to him/her, since unions have had to be careful about those with whom they share information. This has been a sore problem for researchers operating in a political climate which is divisive, and where some are designated spies or informers. Hence, unions and businesses would hardly ever allow external access to the documentation of their organisations and would rarely share their records. My position has meant that such documents have

been made available, and have allowed for a critical analysis to be conducted. It is hoped therefore, that this work, having explored 'forgotten' documents, will pave the way for future researchers to critically assess it and to examine other areas for possible research.

## **Endnotes**

1. There is currently a case in the High Courts concerning the sale of the property belonging to the MPCA. Workers from the Electricity Corporation are claiming that a few union officials, without proper authority and in contravention of the rules of the union, sold the building and have been unable to account for the proceeds of the sale. They are seeking to annul the sale and have the property restored to them.

# Chapter 3

## **The Recognition Strike of 1964: choice of union membership, union rivalry and national politics**

British Guiana, where half Bookers' Undertakings lie, was near civil war in 1964. In the tragic wave of violence which swept over the country for six months, 176 people were killed. Eleven Booker workers were killed on the job. Children of staff were wounded - and one killed - by a bomb attack. Our sugar installations were attacked by bombs and fire. 3500 acres of cane were burnt. We survived these outrages without any significant damage to our plant... (1)

The Sugar Strike of 1964 started in February. It was not the first called by the GAWU to press its demand for recognition from the Sugar Producers' Association (SPA) for the majority of field and factory workers in the sugar industry. These workers were represented by the MPCA which gained recognition from the sugar planters in 1939, following a disturbance on one of the sugar estates, Leonora, in which four persons lost their lives and several others were injured. The 1964 strike ended up as being the longest strike in the history of the country - 165 days. Before the commencement of the strike, the PPP leader Dr. Jagan, had just returned from a Lancaster House Conference between the three main political parties in the country, the PPP, the PNC and the UF, and the Colonial Office on the question of a date for British Guiana's independence and other constitutional issues.

At the constitutional talks, the parties failed to arrive at an agreement and Duncan Sandys, the Colonial Secretary then, requested to be allowed to formulate a solution. To this, Dr Jagan, with a great degree of reluctance, agreed. Sandys disregarded all the representations which had been made by the PPP delegation and imposed a system of "proportional representation" as against "first past the post" which had been the case in elections until this moment. He also decided that independence should only be granted after fresh elections. His rationale for deciding this course was influenced by



the division of the voters along ethnic lines and the failure of the PPP. in the previous elections of 1957 and 1961 to secure over 50 per cent of the votes. In both of these elections, the PPP received 47 per cent and 43 per cent respectively but secured 64 per cent and 57 per cent respectively of the seats in Parliament:

I have had to consider whether the situation would be improved by the introduction of proportional representation ...I am satisfied that there is validity in the argument that in the present circumstances, where no party commands an overall majority of votes, proportional representation would be likely to result in the formation of a coalition government of parties supported by different races, and thus would go some way towards reducing present tensions (Reported in Sallahuddin, 1994 :250)

The PPP leader and his party were furious over this development and:

...formally rejected the imposition of Sandys with a 'hurricane of protest' campaign. This culminated in a country wide Citizens Freedom Rally on January 31, 1964. The situation soon deteriorated. Serious clashes developed, mainly due to an inter union dispute for recognition in the sugar industry (Jagan, 1980: 305).

The 1964 Sugar Strike started by cane cutters at Plantation Leonora, the estate which was famous for many strikes including the one which secured the recognition of the MPCA in 1939. When the cane cutters arrived at the "backdam" on Feb 6, 1964, they were told that work would only be available to half of them. The local GAWU representatives were requested by the workers to represent the case to ensure that work was given to all the cane cutters. According to the Minister of Labour:

The management refused this request and the strike at Leonora developed into the demand for recognition for the GAWU as their bargaining agent. This demand was taken up by the workers on several other estates (Chase 1964:298).

The situation was one in which the union, GAWU, was trying to engage the management in discussion while maximizing the pressure through the workers'

action. It sought from the management a meeting and offered to submit its books with union membership records for scrutiny at the Ministry of Labour. However, the SPA replied that it was satisfied the recognised union, the MPCA, still had majority membership. This response ruled out the examination of the books (ibid).

The Commissioner of Labour thereafter sought to organise a joint meeting of the three parties, the SPA, the MPCA and GAWU, but his efforts were futile. The MPCA refused to attend any meeting while the SPA indicated willingness to meet providing the other parties were prepared to attend. The GAWU expressed a willingness to meet while the MPCA declined the invitation. Therefore, no meeting could have been arranged. The Commissioner of Labour also failed to work out any other satisfactory solution, including an avenue for the SPA to pursue discussions with the GAWU:

On March 4, Mr Harry Lall, President of GAWU informed the Commissioner that SPA's refusal of his union's request for recognition left him no alternative but to call for a general strike in the sugar industry involving all estates to demonstrate to the employers the strength of his union in the sugar industry (ibid:299).

However, the general strike was already in progress since "Feb 17, work on all the plantations came to a stand still" (Jagan 1980:305). Additionally, the GAWU had been complaining over the years that the management was collaborating with the MPCA in coercing workers to remain in the MPCA, and displayed overt favouritism to those workers who showed some loyalty to the MPCA. They even refused to act on workers' requests to stop deducting union dues on behalf of the MPCA, an attitude that was associated "...with characteristic arrogance of centuries of paternal disdain..." (Thakur 1994:102)

What was even worse, was the management's refusal to respond to the requests by workers to cease the deduction of union dues. As a consequence, the GAWU in 1963 submitted:

...notices signed by about 14,000 out of roughly 25,000 workers who

requested that union dues no longer be deducted for the MPCA from their wages. The Sugar Producers Association had taken no effective action, stating that it already had contractual obligations with the MPCA (Jagan 1980:305).

The fact of the matter was that the MPCA did not have a closed shop or agency shop arrangement with the SPA governing the deduction of union dues. Nor was there enabling legislation for this to occur. The agreement signed between the MPCA and the SPA clearly stipulated that for workers to authorise the deduction of union dues, they had to sign a check off membership form, authorising the management of their respective estates to deduct a certain sum of money and remit same to the union. Equally the workers had the right under the agreement to revoke the deduction by signing the Cancellation of Authority to Deduct Union Dues Form and submitting it to the management, one month prior to the date they wished to stop the deduction of the dues. To continue to deduct dues after a notice had been served on the company would be tantamount to a breach of contract between the MPCA and the workers.

Moreover, coercing workers to be in a particular union and refusing their requests to belong to a union of their choice runs counter to I.L.O. Conventions number 87 and 98 touching on freedom of association and the right to free collective bargaining. Furthermore, the action by the SPA was in violation of the Constitution of the Country. The MPCA had been agitating all along for the SPA to grant them the agency shop and this request was actively pursued until it was submitted for arbitration in 1975. The SPA legal advisor quite rightly argued, during the hearing of this matter in front of the Crane Arbitration 1975, that if the agency shop was granted, this may have far reaching legal consequences. The Arbitrator ruled against the agency shop and outlined his position in so doing:

Litigation may well be incurred because except for such sums as have been lawfully deducted from his pay, the worker is entitled to recover from his employer the whole or so much wages earned by him as have not been actually paid to him in money by his employer. (Sec 19 of the Labour Act Chap 98:01). So if an authority is defective, an employee can properly sue to recover what has been deducted... the consent of the worker must at all times be a real consent freely and expressly given, and when so given it must be subject to revocation without fear of the consequences of so doing. It cannot

be held to be a genuine consent otherwise...and any attempt to put into effect the Union's proposals will only create a constitutional question and... create a constitutional impasse in the face of Article 13 of the Constitution of Guyana which provides as follows:

Except with his own consent no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of assembly and association, that is to say, his right to assemble freely and associate with others (unions) and in particular to form or belong to trade unions or other associations for the protection of his interests (Crane 1975:97 & 98).

One must therefore by necessity ask: why did GAWU not assist the workers to challenge the refusal to stop deduction of dues in the Courts or move to get an injunction restraining the SPA from deducting union dues from these workers who had notified management that they did not wish to continue paying union dues to the MPCA? Is it possible that, since the British imposed the PR system on Guyana, both GAWU and the PPP wanted the issue to drag on and allow the anger of the workers to build up so that in the event of the Party and the Union engaging in the "hurricane of protest", the recognition issue would be there to fuel the workers into action?

One has to examine what has taken place earlier to get a full understanding of the situation. During the series of strikes in 1953 which ended with the 25 days general strike from August 31 to Sept 24, the GIWU received solidarity support in the form of strike action from all the unions in the Federation of Unions of Government Employees (FUGE), the GLU, the SMF&WU along with some sections of the electricity and the members of the Transport Union. These unions had earlier called on the SPA to recognise GIWU, failing which they threatened to go on a 24 hour protest strike. After the SPA "did not budge" on September 22 some sections of the workforce went immediately into strike action and the combined unions all went on a 4 hour sympathy strike on September 24th:

...following which they all decided to end all strikes on the undertaking given by the PPP Government that it will "proceed" immediately to have introduced and passed a Labour Relations Bill to provide for the compulsory recognition of trade unions selected by workers through a secret poll (Chase 1964:208, 209).

The Minister of Labour then, Ashton Chase, had during the course of the 25 days strike persuaded the SPA to make some significant movement. As he put it "the GIWU came very near to the bull's eye of recognition but there was a slip between the cup and the lip" (ibid:208). The SPA, during meetings with the Minister, agreed to recognise GIWU for field workers and allow the continuation of the MPCA with factory workers but this was rejected by the GIWU. A few industrial relations experts in the sugar industry pointed out that the MPCA still had a considerable amount of support in the factory hence, the offer. Former Chief Industrial Relations Manager to Bookers Sugar Estates, L. I. Naraine, commenting much later, mentioned that this rejection by the GIWU was "a grave error". (3)

A counter proposal was then put that GIWU should accept all the agreements entered into between SPA and the MPCA. The GIWU maintained that it would reserve the right "to negotiate and settle fresh agreements with the SPA." There was also the position of granting recognition to both MPCA and GIWU for the same workers "provided they would agree to work jointly with each other with the ultimate aim of amalgamating" (ibid:208). With the rejection of these proposals by the GIWU, an opportunity for genuine representation for the sugar workers was lost. Any one of the proposals if accepted by the GIWU would have seen the early exit of the MPCA from the sugar industry.

All that was needed was an initial breakthrough for the GIWU. After the recognition of GIWU any of the agreements made could have in fact been altered. All GIWU had to do was to submit the relevant notice in accordance with those agreements for an amendment. And in any event, those agreements had an expiry date which would have been two years hence.

What was even more striking was that this partial recognition would have come about during a period which witnessed the most solid multiracial unity in the history of the country. In fact, when the other unions supported the GIWU in September 1953, it was the most powerful form of unity displayed by the working class since the struggle began for national liberation and not witnessed again, until the 1989 strike which will

be discussed later. One would have thought the GIWU would have grasped the opportunity and continued to forge unity of the workers with the ultimate hope of enabling their leader and party (PPP) to consolidate their position for the ultimate showdown for independence from the British. However, the events in 1953 meant that the PPP was put into a position to introduce the Labour Relations Bill. After overcoming some initial hurdles with the Speaker of the House of Assembly and opposition from the SPA and MPCA, the Bill was passed on Oct 8th, 1953. The next day the Constitution was suspended, British troops took control of the country and an interim government was installed (Chase 1964. Jagan 1966).

The British obviously felt threatened. Booker was a British multinational company which was making substantial contribution to the British Treasury, a fact that was confirmed by Lord Campbell, the Chairman of The Booker Holdings:

A great deal of Britain's past wealth came from our ability to deploy and dominate the resources of the underdeveloped Commonwealth...That in recent years, the British Exchequer has been collecting about £10m a year in duty on rum from British Guyana. (Booker Report 1964:17).

This revenue was in addition to all the other direct taxes and dividends paid to British shareholders annually. The British obviously viewed the rejection by the GIWU of what was considered by the planters to be reasonable offers and the passage of the legislation by the PPP as serious developments. The colonial masters must have been scared over the manner in which their authority had been challenged. By fighting Bookers, the PPP were also fighting the entire British apparatus. The collaboration within this apparatus took place in the following manner:

Apart from direct representation in the Legislative Council, the sugar interests have their representatives in important positions on various statutory boards and committees.. The political power permits the sugar planters to determine major questions of policy involving their own interests. Once the policy is decided, it is inevitably put into effect (Jagan 1954:22).

The recognition battle having been lost in 1953 with the suspension of the

Constitution and other repressive measures by the British, workers struggles were severely curtailed during the period of the interim government. Many of their leaders, including Dr Jagan and his wife, were either under house arrest, or imprisoned (4).

### **The Tension Heightened**

On March 4, 1964, the day of the endorsement of the strike by GAWU, a bomb was thrown into a bus which was transporting strike breakers to Albion, resulting in the death of two persons, Gunraj and Munroe. This was followed two days after by the death of a female worker Kowsilla and injury to several others when a "non striker" drove a tractor over the Leonora bridge where strikers were squatting peacefully...and picketing the gate at the factory" (Jagan 1966:306). After this incident the police used force and tear gas to remove strikers from the area. This incident infuriated the strikers and "the situation deteriorated rapidly; strikers ambushed and fired at strikebreakers" (ibid). The death of Kowsilla drew strong condemnation from the clerical workers in the industry, who were under a different bargaining unit, the Sugar Estates Clerks Association (SECA) which later changed its name to the NAACIE. The members of this union immediately proceeded on a protest strike over the killing, and while the strike was on, the "Mirror", a PPP owned newspaper, of Sunday March 8, 1964 reported that the President of the Union, Mr Hiram Persaud, vowed to keep his members out on the strike until GAWU was recognized. Persaud claimed that he was misquoted and issued a release that:

The Sugar Estates Clerks Association would like to make it clear that their protest strike was called because of the recent unfortunate incident at Leonora Estate and did not have any connection with the GAWU efforts to recognition (5).

After the clerks resumed duties, the strikers threatened them on their way to work. The strikers made several attempts at Leonora to prevent the clerks from reaching work. The SECA and other unions which were not striking were forced to seek the protection of the management. Even the Commissioner of Police promised them

adequate protection. The situation got out of hand on March 13, when cane cutters called for their "cutlasses to slaughter the coolies - meaning members of SECA" (6). The members were attempting to go home for lunch. As a result of this incident, the Leonora Branch of SECA took protest strike action over the intimidation from cane cutters and management's refusal to provide adequate protection for members of SECA while on the job and on the premises of the employers (7).

This strike created some bitterness among strikers and SECA categories, and on a few estates some of the clerks and their homes came under attack. The situation at LBI Estate was tense when a clerk was viciously chopped and nearly lost one of his hands. He had to be flown to Venezuela for emergency medical attention and another employee at LBI was physically assaulted by striking workers. The tension reached a high point where both of the major political parties, the PPP and the PNC were engaged in organised thuggery and violence of the meanest form. Racial conflict had engulfed the entire country. But this was not all. Indian workers in the Sugar Industry were also under attack from Indian strikers. Their homes were the target of attack and glass windows broken. Some of the representatives who were active during this strike claimed, when I interviewed them, that they regretted these events, which were full of hate generated by "head office leaders". Another representative, who was about to be retired claimed that "Pason (Phillip Ganesh) shouldn't a been chop up and Bill should never slap Wong after he left the pay office at LBI" (Interview: September 1994).

Six weeks into the strike, the Minister of Labour made a broadcast to the nation in which he sought to put the strike in perspective. He pointed out that after his ministry's initial failure to reach an agreement with the parties and the GAWU's decision to officially sanction the general strike, his Commissioner of Labour continued to make attempts at resolving the issue. The Deputy Chairman of Bookers, Mr Bishop had also visited British Guiana to have a first hand look at the situation. He issued a release on March 12, pointing out that the recognition dispute "should be resolved through the established machinery of the Labour Department" (Chase 1964:299). The Minister pointed out that Mr Bishop was quite late as the Department had taken an initiative from the outset to resolve the matter.



Continuing, the Minister indicated that the Commissioner of Labour met representatives again on March 16 and asked if they had any recommendation in effecting a settlement to the dispute:

The gist of SPA's suggestion was that there should be no political agitation: violence etc. should be condemned by the Government, that Government and the two trade unions should advise the workers to return to work and that a Committee or Court of Enquiry be appointed to make recommendations which they would be willing to consider seriously if the Committee was a reputable one. They would even consider a poll if the two unions agreed. The employers said they were agreeable to an examination of the membership of the two Unions (Chase 1964:300).

By their proposals, the SPA was seeking to take the high ground in this dispute. While they were not refusing to have steps taken to resolve the dispute, the conditions outlined by them gave the MPCA authority to veto any proposal put forward by the Ministry. With respect to the surveys of the two unions' books, they did not say what their position would be if both unions had a duplication of members. The proposals were, however, put to the MPCA and GAWU. On March 17, the Commissioner of Labour met the MPCA and they requested that troops be used to patrol the sugar area to ensure that workers who were willing to work were not intimidated by strikers, they opposed the poll and further proposed the examination of the books of the two unions. GAWU was called in the following day and they rejected the survey. They claimed that they had asked for a survey earlier but the SPA refused and since they have been forced to strike, there can be no resumption of work until recognition was granted to the GAWU. This was a mandate given to them by the striking workers (ibid).

Because the GAWU had earlier requested the survey, the Commissioner of Labour requested that the union reconsider its position on the survey. The GAWU then enquired of the SPA's position in the event that (a) one union has more than 50 per cent and the other less than 50 per cent and (b) if both unions had over 50 per cent. These questions were put to the SPA by the Commissioner of Labour on the same day after the meeting with GAWU. To the first question, they gave a clear cut answer that

they would recognise the Union with the majority support, but when the second question was put, they became hesitant and changed their position with one answer to both questions:

The employers would find great difficulty in refusing to recognise the union with the majority provided that the examination is conducted in an atmosphere of peace and goodwill (ibid).

This was obviously not a satisfactory answer in a strike situation especially since grave doubts existed in the minds of the workers, because it was clear to them that the SPA was in favour of the company union - MPCA. This was what the Minister had to say on the latest position of the employers:

The SPA by attaching a proviso on the possibility of recognition might have also opened itself to the charge that of tying up principle with procedure. The proviso, which some might have been inclined to call an escape clause, is that the examination of the books should be conducted in an atmosphere of "peace and goodwill". Such an atmosphere could conceivably be the subject of dispute, unless there was some authority who could be relied upon by all parties to determine just when such an atmosphere prevailed (ibid:301).

In any event, the position was discussed by the Executive Council of GAWU and the President indicated that after a lengthy deliberation the proposal "is not acceptable since we feel that the majority of the workers who are on strike in the sugar industry have demonstrated in no uncertain terms that they want GAWU as their bargaining agent" (ibid: 302). The Union firmly believed that the proposal of the SPA would not reflect a democratic choice of the workers, hence, they were willing to "examine any new proposal that you may wish to put forward to settle the dispute" (ibid). At this stage it would appear that the GAWU began taking a tougher position and were overlooking areas where they could have negotiated a compromise, since the only area in the SPA's response which could be considered contentious was their position that the survey had to be conducted in an 'atmosphere of peace and goodwill'. The GAWU could have requested clarification on the statement if they seriously wanted to settle the issue. They could have proposed that the survey be conducted within a short time following the resumption of work. This would have cut the ground from under

the feet of both the SPA and the MPCA.

The MPCA was again called to a meeting with the Commissioner of Labour and a proposal was put to them which involved representatives of the International Labour Organization (ILO) going to British Guiana to determine whether conditions were ripe for the conduct of a poll. After taking some time to examine this proposal, the MPCA rejected it and claimed that the Government was out to destroy a democratic union and that even if a poll were to be conducted it could not be held under the conditions of gross mass intimidation, unprecedented terrorism, arson and murder now rampant on the sugar estates. The SPA also indicated that the ILO team would have to get the support of the MPCA. This seemed to indicate that the MPCA and the SPA collaborated on their responses to any suggestion put forward by the Department of Labour. It was clear that the MPCA would not agree to any situation which would result in that union being de-recognized. They would rather fight it down the line. There was still some support for the MPCA as production was not at a standstill by that time. With the help of scab labour and some other employees, the employers were producing sugar at about between 25 to 35 per cent by mid March. Because of economic difficulties some workers were trekking back to work. This is the case in many protracted industrial disputes. The attacks on those workers who went back to work, by their own colleagues on strike, forced them into the camp of the non strikers. This development led the MPCA to believe that they could easily woo them into their union. Therefore, the longer the issue was allowed to be dragged out, the morale and solidarity of the workers were likely to be put under severe strain (Interview: September 1994).

By the end of March, both of the major races were beginning to draw battle lines. The leaders of the PNC and PPP were making no serious attempt to stop what was taking place. All sense of reasonableness seems to have disappeared. It is a real irony that the government in power could initiate a "hurricane of protests" which was tearing the country apart, but would not seek to find an early solution to the problem. Governing the country after the Sandys' formula was apparently not of interest to the PPP any more. They were desperate to get a withdrawal of the PR system, imposed by Sandys.

The question which has to be asked, is why was it that Dr Jagan allowed Sandys to impose a solution? Did he not have patience? He weathered the storm in 1963 and must have known the British and American Governments did not want him in power. They used every means available to them to undermine his administration, to divide his party and after that succeeded it was obvious that the British would have decided in favour of his rivals. It was Dr. Jagan's opponents who initiated the PR system of government. By allowing Sandys to adjudicate, Jagan displayed his weakness as a negotiator. Perhaps the answer rests in the PPP's position that while they were in Government, they were not in control and only independence could pave the way for his Government to manage the country under an ideology to which it subscribed. The following statement showed his impatience and frustration:

Our position as a government had become untenable and humiliating. In actual fact, although we were in office, we were without any real power... on this situation my attitude was do your damnedest; we cannot carry on under existing conditions... (Jagan 1980:279-80).

The strike must therefore be seen in the light of his Government's frustration over British imposition and his desire to launch a hurricane of protest to perhaps teach the British a lesson and force the withdrawal of the proposed system of PR. But as the strike continued, things were getting worse for him. A tactical retreat by early March might have been helpful to the workers' cause and his party's position, but with every passing day of the strike, GAWU was adamant and extreme in their demand for recognition. They apparently did not look at the demoralising effect the continuing production was having on strikers, and in addition, their weak financial position.

Additionally, the armed forces were not on Jagan's side and hardly ever sought to defend the strikers and their families. When the Ministry's last proposal was put on March 25, that both a membership survey and a poll should be undertaken, this meant the membership survey was to be undertaken to determine MPCA membership and the poll to be conducted to determine GAWU support (Chase 1964:304). On this last proposal the parties failed to arrive at a settlement, and in the meantime, the country was divided by civil unrest. It was clear that the strike had lost its industrial

intentions and had become a politically charged issue. The Commissioner of Labour, according to the Minister, had also gathered that the TUC, which incidentally was not supportive of the Government, had expressed a willingness to go along with a poll, "but seems to be concerned that a poll must be held in conditions of calm and normalcy" (ibid:303). This position, however, seems to run counter to what Jagan said, namely that "the MPCA had a vested interest in not agreeing to any compromise.. On its rigid stand, it was backed by the TUC" (Jagan 1966:312).

In any event, after lengthy discussions, the TUC had previously agreed with the Government and Employers' Association, on the withdrawal of the Labour Relations Bill of 1963, that if a union did not wish to submit its books for a membership check, then a poll could be held. In fact polls had been held in 1962 and 1963 to settle inter-union disputes, resulting in the replacement of recognized unions by challenging unions. The TUC no doubt could also have taken the position that the MPCA had never refused to submit its books for examination hence the poll was not necessary. But their views did not matter. The MPCA was firm, uncompromising and by the end of March, was receiving tacit support of not only the employers, but the police, the opposition political parties and in the main, the PNC.

An impasse had definitely been reached by the end of March. While the partial strike continued, production passed the 50 per cent level on Estates, and there was increased bitterness between the Indians and Africans, so that it was evident that some solution must be found. The Council of Ministers advised the Governor that he appoint a Commission of Enquiry to investigate the matter (8). He had previously rejected requests from the Council of Ministers to order a poll to settle the recognition dispute. Consequently, on the 16th May, the Governor on the advice of the Council of Ministers appointed a Committee under the provisions of Section 6 of the Labour Ordinance, Chapter 103, with the following terms of reference:

To enquire into the existing dispute in the sugar industry arising out of the claim by the Guyana Agricultural Workers' Union for recognition as the sole bargaining agent for field and factory workers in the sugar industry, to ascertain by whatever method the Committee deems appropriate whether the

Guyana Agricultural Workers Union or the Man Power Citizens' Association has the support among the field and factory workers, to report thereon and to make recommendations for resolving the dispute (Ministry of Labour Report 1964:30).

The Chairman of the Committee was B.O. Adams QC, with other members being Professor Horace B. Davis, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Guyana and the Retired Superintendent of Works, Mr Edric Cecil Brandon, with Mr M.G.N. Sankies, Inspector of Labour as Secretary:

Mr Adams resigned before any sitting took place and the Hon. Mr Justice Guya Persaud was appointed as chairman. At the second meeting of the committee, the Counsel for the MPCA made certain submissions in view of the fact that a writ had been filed by the MPCA against members of the Committee on the validity of their appointment. The Chairman upheld the submission and adjourned the hearing 'sine die' until the Court had settled the issue (ibid).

The matter was never investigated by this committee, partly due to the change in Government in 1964. One would have thought that with the appointment of the Committee and given the situation in the country, the GAWU would have called off the strike at that time. This would have been seen as a partial victory and it would have been in a position to consolidate for a future struggle. But that was not the case. No rational position was stated by GAWU for the continuation of the strike after May 16, except for their agitation "No recognition, no work". If again the objective was to maximize the Indian vote, the PPP leader would have known that he could not have obtained the votes of wealthy Indians, who were against him and more so the Indian sugar workers who went back to work - and who perhaps would have given everything else to him except their right to survival, which depended on some work. Ridicule and antagonism was hardly the way to win their vote. Lastly, the racial antagonism would be seen as a loss to the PPP, judging from the support Dr Jagan received from a portion of the working class blacks. He himself acknowledged this fact after the split with Burnham (Jagan 1966: 175).

The continuation of the strike beyond this point must therefore be seen as a miscalculation. By its prolongation there were serious developments for the

Government. The extension of the sugar strike was sinking Jagan and the country into even deeper problems since the bauxite workers, who were mainly supporters of the PNC then, were very eager to flex their muscles. The battle lines having been drawn and thugs from both parties on the loose, anything was expected. On June 1, over 3,000 Bauxite workers from Wismar/ Mackenzie took strike action alleging that the management had made statements that (i) guns were being made on the company's premises and (ii) the black people of Wismar had behaved like cannibals. (Ministry of Labour Report 1964:32).

Following discussions between the officials of the union and the company under the Chairmanship of the Deputy Commissioner of Labour, the Management "agreed to issue a circular deprecating the use of any remarks calculated to impair good race relations or to foster prejudice or antagonism" (ibid). This strike came to an end after seven days. The union was obviously seeking to take a high ground on this issue by insisting on such a circular from management. The Mine Workers Union intended to show that they were not going to tolerate any racial remarks or prejudicial statements. They were seeking to distant themselves from the sugar workers. But this obviously was not their true intention. The bauxite community was almost cleared of all Indians before the strike took place, when "over 1,500 persons almost wholly of East Indian origin were rendered homeless in a trail of unprecedented barbarities that erupted in the Wismar/Mackenzie areas in April 1964" (Chase 1964:305).

The situation was getting out of hand and the PPP leader became aware that he was obviously losing ground in the dispute. Just before the declaration of the state of emergency the PPP leader, as Premier, dispatched a letter to the leader of the PNC, which pointed out that:

the situation had deteriorated to such a point that something dramatic must be done to prevent further racial strife between the two major ethnic groups, to unite the working class and to create a stable and strong government. I propose, therefore, to invite you to join me in the formation of a coalition government between the People's Progressive Party and the People's National Congress...It is my considered view that in the charged atmosphere of today, a holding government for a

short period until the general elections later this year, will not suffice to create the unity, peace and harmony which are so necessary today at all levels. It is my view that the coalition should continue after the next general elections on an agreed basis and that the party leader of the majority party should be the Prime Minister and the other leader, the Deputy Prime Minister... (Jagan 1966:318).

Dr Jagan went on to suggest in the letter the composition of the Government, the House of Assembly, and the manner in which a programme could be worked out "based on a domestic policy of democracy and socialism and a foreign policy of non-alignment." (ibid). He further requested that the matter be given early attention so as to obtain a reply in a day or two. This was not the first time that the PPP tried to secure a unity pact with the PNC, in fact since the split in 1955 between Burnham and Jagan, there were several attempts on the part of the PPP leader to have the problem resolved. However, Dr Jagan should have realised by then that in the light of the influence of the British and Americans over several personalities in the PNC and Burnham's own resolute desire to become Prime Minister, that there was no way Burnham would agree without him being given the number one spot.

To concede this top position would have been expecting too much from Dr Jagan. In fact the Chairman of Bookers saw the unity of Jagan and Burnham as the only way in which there could be prosperity for the country and a stable climate of industrial relations, when he wrote in June 1964:

New elections under proportional representation are due to be held later this year. It would be foolish to speculate on the result: but whatever the outcome, it will certainly remain true that the only real way out of the existing conflicts lies in some form of coalition or accommodation between the People's Progressive Party (mainly Indian and rural) and the People's National Congress (mainly African and urban). Meanwhile the people of British Guiana need all practical help and sympathetic understanding available to them (Booker Report 1963:19).

This was Sir Jock, later Lord, Campbell's incisive mind at work - while his interest was to ensure higher dividends to the shareholders he had equally expressed concern



over the failure of the British Government in making more aid available for the development of the colonial countries of the Commonwealth including Guiana. He had argued that while the British Exchequer was extracting huge sums from British Guiana, all they were putting back was about £3m a year of aid to that country including Exchequer loans (Booker Report 1964:17). He stressed "I believe that the British Balance of Payments would suffer if new enterprises in the developing Commonwealth were not undertaken or - which perhaps matters even more - if existing ones were run down, or got rid of to foreign buyers." (Ibid). Given Sir Jock's thinking on these matters and the special relationship he had with Dr Jagan, it was unfortunate that these two men could not have met to settle the problem of union recognition before it had created such enormous disruptions to the industry and the country as a whole.

In so far as Jagan's appeal to Burnham was concerned, based on what was taking place in the country under a Jagan led government, there was no way Burnham was going to assist in bailing out Jagan. The intentions of Burnham were very clear since during his political meetings he was declaring that the "voters must now decide whether they want Jagan or Burnham ... we will take part in no coalition. In England they have either Home or Wilson. In British Guiana, it will have to be either Burnham or Jagan." (Jagan 1980:324).

### **The Governor Intervened**

A State of Emergency was declared on May 23 and on June 13 the iron fist of the British Government was in evidence. The Governor stripped the Government of almost all its power. It was a "virtual suspension of the constitution and informal dissolution of the legislature" (Chase 1964:305). The Governor assumed wide powers and effected the arrest of thirty two political activists including the President and the General Secretary of GAWU and the Deputy Premier. Only two PNC members were detained. Those in detention were held under an Emergency Legislation, passed on that same day. "The British Army was put above the law; its men were made immune to arrest" (Jagan 1980:314).

On the day of the detention of his colleagues, the Premier went on the air to broadcast to the nation about his initiative to unite the two parties, the PNC and the PPP. There was absolutely no sign of any consideration given to his pleadings by Burnham, whose supporters were engaged in open warfare with little restraint by the security forces. With their leaders in detention and the State of Emergency in place, the GAWU decided on July 25, 1964 to end the strike without the issue being resolved. By the end of the year, the industry produced 258,378 tons of sugar as against 317,137 tons and 326,023 tons for the years 1963 and 1962 respectively. Despite this long strike the industry ended up with a profit for the year.

The recognition issue could not have been pursued effectively, within a short period of time, since the Commission of Enquiry was blocked in the Courts. Parliament was also ineffective, following the declaration of the state of emergency and the PPP losing its majority support in the National Assembly, due to the detention of some of its members. The workers funds were also exhausted and there was no scope for any major struggle to take place.

The only other avenue available to the Union at that time was to move to the Courts for a discharge of the injunction to allow the Committee to continue its work. But this was not done. July saw the worst clashes seen in the country. "Bombings, shootings and savage assaults were the order of the day. Arson was rampant. Hundreds of houses were destroyed and maliciously damaged. Physical partition in certain areas came into being with the rapidity of lightning." (Chase 1964: 305). By August the situation was slowly moving towards peace but the strike and racial upheavals had polarized the country. The Colonial Secretary then moved the elections, which had been planned for earlier date, to December 7, 1964, under all the conditions previously set.

With the election of a Labour Government in Britain in October 1964, the PPP leader held out high hopes for a reversal of the Sandys formula. The Labour Party, when in opposition in June 1964 had condemned the imposition of PR on British Guiana (Jagan 1980: 320-325). But the Harold Wilson administration was already under

pressure from Washington and did not vary the Conservative ruling on the elections. According to Dr Jagan "it was against this background of Labour's betrayal that we decided to contest the 1964 general elections under protest" (ibid: 322).

At the industrial level, following the ending of the strike, two very unpleasant developments took place. At Diamond Estate, 45 East Indian Cane cutters and loaders struck for three days from November 2, 1964 for "refusing to work with Negroes for alleged discriminatory practice" by the foreman. The management promptly changed the foreman and agreed to investigate the charges made. (Ministry of Labour Report 1964). The other incident took place in Mackenzie on March 2, 1965 when 80 African workers in one section struck for one hour in protest "over the placement of an Indian employee who returned after the disturbances". The employee was placed in a different job after resumption of work (Ministry of Labour Report 1965).

The December elections took place under a State of Emergency, with many major party activists of the PPP and few from the PNC still under detention orders. The result was the formation of a coalition Government between the PNC and the UF. Burnham thereafter took over as Premier and after independence was granted, he became Prime Minister. The PPP, which secured the highest percentage of votes, 45.8 per cent as against 40.5 per cent and 12.4 per cent for the PNC and UF respectively was manipulated out of office. There was no political solution of the sort Lord Campbell had envisaged. There is no doubt that the leader of the PPP was given a raw deal by both the British and the American Governments. In fact, this was acknowledged by American Government functionaries long after the event had taken place. The manner in which he was dethroned earned him considerable support throughout his political life thereafter, apart from occasions when workers lost their patience over his abundance of tactical errors.

### **An Analysis of the Strike**

This 1964 strike is worth examining from a critical standpoint. For Jagan to merely shout "cheated but not defeated" was not enough. After the deadlock at the

November 1963 independence talks, Jagan should never have allowed Sandys to arbitrate. It was too important an issue to put into the hands of a diehard conservative. In any event, he knew fully well that, since the 1950s, the British government had been trying desperately to find someone as a replacement for him and had succeeded in splitting his party. Nonetheless, Jagan had gone to London to discuss independence and should have ruled out any discussion aimed at varying the electoral system. He had just won the 1961 elections convincingly and even completed half his term in office. There was widespread support for independence. Even Burnham and d'Aguiar publicly said that they supported independence. They could not have done otherwise. The nationalist feeling was very strong. This alone was an incentive to hammer away for independence, never mind if it had taken several additional meetings to secure a satisfactory solution.

Negotiations can sometimes be tedious. All sorts of red herrings will be put on the table. Jagan could have left when the talks broke down, gone back home and marshalled his forces for the "hurricane of protest" for independence. This would have been a more multiracial and nationalistic struggle and would have put Burnham and company in a spot. They would have had to give the struggle backing, leaving extraneous matters behind, or they probably would have lost considerable support.

The countrywide march later in January against the Sandys formula was one sided and the racial slurs during the course of the march isolated many Afro Guyanese. In fact they saw no need to join in the march since their leader got what he wanted. The situation would have been different in an agitation for independence. Many other British Colonies were given independence under the same electoral system of first past the post. Why not Guyana? There would have been stronger international support and maybe the Labour Party might have been in a better position to negotiate with Jagan if they had not had to deal with a Conservative imposition and someone who, in the eyes of British shareholders, was intent on battering British interests.

Further, by persisting with the recognition strike just after the 'hurricane of protest' march, with divisive chanting (9) the planters were able to deem the strike political.

The opposition PNC, and both the TUC and MPCA gained political mileage from the strike being dubbed political. The strike started as a genuine grievance. The opportunity was, however, ripe for the union and the angry PPP to steer it in the political direction. Why was the recognition strike not called in 1963 when over 14,000 signatures had been handed in? This was after the 1963 general strike, during a period of calm, and an ideal time to repay the MPCA leaders for their role in that strike. Moreover, why was a committee not set up earlier by the Government to investigate the sugar strike? Why did the union not challenge the continued deductions of dues in the Courts after the revocation forms were handed in by them on behalf of the workers?

If the motive was not political, why was the strike continued after the employers had agreed at its early stage for a survey of the books? After all, this was the request made by the union. Even so, why was the strike not discontinued after the striking workers, Council of Ministers or Premier got the Governor to set up the Committee of Enquiry? When the offer was made by the SPA about a reputable committee to investigate the matter, why did the GAWU not seek examples of names and pursue the matter along that line? It was likely that the SPA would have made movements early in a strike rather than at a later time, especially when workers started to break solidarity, with a portion returning to work. In industrial disputes, employers more often than not harden their positions in protracted strikes especially when they begin recruiting scabs and observe the cracks in the workers' solidarity.

If the GAWU had shown some goodwill at the initial stages of the strike, there was a likelihood of the employers agreeing a compromise. Having displayed their strength, if GAWU had called off the strike, and sought dialogue with the SPA, with some pressure from their Department of Labour, there would have been a possibility also of some constructive engagement. No employer likes to negotiate under duress and some kind of goodwill from a strong union at times tends to cause some unreasonable employers to sit back and rethink their position.

Therefore, it is submitted that there were instances where the opportunity presented

itself for a resumption of work, from an industrial relations standpoint and these were not taken up by the GAWU. Looking at the strike in its totality, it would appear that if it was not politically motivated, it was wrongly timed, and if it was politically motivated to force the British into submission, it was a poor strategy. No government in power, whether independent or under a colonial master, would want to govern under a situation of civil and political unrest. If the government is managing under the wings of a colonial power and cannot function effectively, then it might be a wise act to sensitise the people and then seek to muster mass support for final liberation, not to take decisions which would divide the country.

Since Dr Jagan was a communist then, and always advocated that the way towards revolutionary democracy is alliance and struggle, he must have known that "the parties which stand at the head of the people's movement must always be ready to take up the decisive struggle whenever it becomes inevitable, they must be in a position quickly to switch from one type of method to another in accordance with the challenging needs and the conditions of the struggle" (10). The condition in 1964 was not ripe for a partisan political struggle, neither was it ripe for an industrial struggle. The country, having months before come out of a bitter and divisive general strike, was unable to endure yet another one. When the Government initiated the protest then it could be seen that rather than fighting the British, they ended up initiating an action which backfired on themselves. They played into the hands of the opposition. The PPP leader himself said if the strike had not taken place, the ensuing problems would not have occurred (Jagan 1966:315). How in the name of good governance could he have allowed his own supporters to be goaded or molested into a state of anger and to start bombing and attacking others, knowing fully well he did not have the police on his side and this was the game his opponents knew best? Burnham finished the job and the earlier, rightly celebrated days of a united people thereafter became dark days of horror. Gunraj and Munroe and Kowsilla and all the others who were affected should not have been made to suffer by a misguided few. In these respects history is likely to judge both Jagan and Burnham harshly for the role they played in causing such a division of a people (Gopaul 1994).

## Conclusion

This chapter discusses what was the longest strike ever to take place in the sugar industry, which was conducted for a union of the workers' choice. It started on one location as a legitimate industrial dispute but escalated into one making a national demand for trade union recognition. However, the development of the strike became intertwined with political conflicts. Just prior to the strike, the political leaders were in conference at Lancaster House, negotiating independence for British Guiana. At this conference the British Government supported the position of the opposition parties and agreed to grant independence, but not until after fresh elections under a new electoral system of proportional representation. The leader of the party in Government was furious over the imposition and called for demonstrations against the British Government's decision. The demonstrations were a one-sided affair with only supporters of the PPP participating. This created a tension among the races, and the sugar strike created fertile grounds for the disturbances which ensued.

Both the PNC and the PPP used the situation to rally their supporters, but as we have seen this left a nation racially divided. The mixture of a political and industrial struggle made it difficult for the recognition issue to be resolved. The charged situation did not bring forth rational thinking around the bargaining table. Leaders of unions became inflexible and extreme in their demands. Moreover, the racial division eased the pressure on employers, which an industrial strike of that magnitude ought to create, since they could recruit scabs with very little difficulty, especially when they were of the opposite race. Workers became demoralised as production was taking place. Recommendations from the government's own civil servants at the Ministry of Labour were rejected out of hand by the union which was supported by the governing party. The end result was that the country became unmanageable, and by the time the Premier sought to work out a pact with Burnham, the latter was in no mood to settle any differences.

This strike was therefore aborted and the relationship among the parties remained strained. The organisational objectives and industrial interests of the workers had

become compromised and unfulfilled because of political imperatives, on the one hand those of a colonial state and on the other those of competing components of the nationalist movement. However the workers, having sensed that the employers were supportive of the MPCA, remained resolute to have a different union and continued in their agitation to have a resolution of the issue. The next chapter therefore analyses the struggles which ensued thereafter under a new government and discusses also the reduction of the number of unions in the industry.



## **Endnotes:**

1. Statement by Sir Jock Campbell, Chairman of Bookers, appearing in the Booker Group Review for the year 1964.
2. For a more detailed account of these events see Ashton Chase, History of Trade Unionism in Guyana.(1964).
3. Statement made by the then Chief Industrial Relations Manager of Bookers in 1974 during an informal meeting with NAACIE.
4. For a more information on the incidents in the 1950s and earlier, see Chase (1964), and Jagan (1954, 1966).
5. Minutes of SECA. Executive Council meeting held on Saturday March 14, 1964.
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*
8. Jagan (1980: 312) indicated that on May 23 the Governor acted on his advice, while the Ministry of Labour Report for 1964 indicated that the Governor intervened on the advice from the council of ministers. Chase (1964: 302) indicates that the Government had appointed the Committee. No mention is made in either work that the Chairman was B.O. Adams who later resigned, nor was there any mention of the attendance of the MPCA at the first sitting of the Commission. It would therefore be appropriate to rely on the Report of the Ministry of Labour.
9. A full account of this march was given by Maurice Mangal, who worked at Enmore Estate for in excess of 30 years and was an active union representative. Mangal is now in retirement.
10. Georgi Dimitrov, The September Uprising, November 18, 1923. Reported in PPP 1977, Attachments.

# Chapter 4

## Recognition/Wages Struggles 1964-1976

With the installation of a new government, the recognition issue was not pressed for with the vigour one might expect. The focus of attention in the sugar industry following the 1964 general strike was towards the resolution of grievances in the industry. The GAWU did not even bother to effectively agitate for the Guya Persand Committee, set up to investigate the 1964 recognition claim, to deliberate on the issue. The union could have tried to persuade the Courts to clear the way for the committee to commence hearings, but the matter was never pursued. Sugar workers, however, continued to resort to strike action against conditions and pricing which they reckoned to be inappropriate. They started as early as February 1965, when almost 1,000 workers withheld their labour for four days demanding that unqualified workers should receive medical treatment on the estate. Then nearly 1,200 Leonora workers struck for six days in March 1965 for payment on Wednesdays. Management eventually agreed to pay on Thursdays instead.

The irony about the inter union rivalry was that some of the same workers who were striking and demanding the recognition of GAWU were at times caught up in striking on behalf of a MPCA call for improvements in bonus, wages and the like. This was evident in the following events. On March 24, 1965 GAWU called a strike lasting between 1 and 3 days on several estates for better working conditions, without giving specific details. Then a week later, MPCA called a strike for between 1 to 4 days in protest against the delay of bonus talks. The support of GAWU was far greater. The highest support for GAWU on any location was around 1700 while the MPCA's best performance was around 1050. At Enmore, where the workers were on strike for both Unions, the GAWU obtained the support of 1588 while MPCA secured 446. (Report of the Ministry of Labour 1965). Much later an Enmore representative admitted that there were times when workers will strike based on the issue involved and overlook the question of which union called the strike. Hence, in the period of

the inter-union rivalry, workers do find themselves striking for both unions or end up striking by themselves, while at times the dispute was settled by the recognized union (Interview: October 1994). On November 2, 1965 almost 2,500 workers at Albion/ Port Mourant struck for 8 days against independence talks in London. They were joined for 2 days by nearly 600 workers at Skeldon and 1 day by 244 workers at Leonora. The birthplace (Port Mourant) of the champion of Guyana's independence (Jagan) struck against the talks when it was clear that the country was going to gain independence under the rule of his arch rival. The Country however, secured independence from Britain on May 26, 1966. The sugar Chairman, Lord Campbell was specially invited by Prime Minister Burnham for the celebrations and the two had discussions about putting more emphasis on Guyanese appointments at the senior staff level (Booker Group Report 1965: 9).

For 1965, therefore, while both unions continued to flex their muscles in a limited way, the evidence reveals that it was the workers which on the various locations continued to call strikes in furtherance of their working conditions (Ministry of Labour Report : 1965). Since most of the strikes which occurred in the industry between 1965 and 1976 were the normal work stoppages typical of the industry, only those which are significant to the theme will be dealt with. While the industrial relations situation in 1965 had improved significantly over 1964, the industry ended with financial losses despite significantly lower production costs and a higher level of production. The production level was however affected by drought and the profitability affected by:

the discouragement of a world price stagnating at a level at which nobody can make sugar. In 1964, it fell from £88 to £25 a ton. In 1965, it fell to below £18 a ton. Despite the protection afforded by the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement, and the favourable outlet for West Indian Sugar in the United States, the average price received by Bookers Sugar Estates for all their sugar in 1965 was about £6 a ton lower than in 1964; and in 1966 it could be lower still (The Booker Group Report and Accounts 1965:10).

The lack of profit was therefore not of the workers' making. In fact they were praised by their employers "for the resolution and new confidence with which they started to make good the enforced neglect of 1964" (ibid).

For 1966, there were 91 strikes in the industry resulting in 63,776 work days lost with wages amounting to \$335,789.00 sacrificed (Min of Labour 1966). These were, however, short strikes, and on some locations, the workers at varying times demanded the recognition of GAWU. As Bookers reported:

The crop suffered gravely from drought; and it was also hampered by a series of strikes originating in political rivalries rather than industrial disputes. For the past five years, all the people who work for Bookers Sugar Estates have faced extraordinarily difficult conditions ( Booker Report, 1966:26).

The agitation in the sugar industry was stepped up during the period before and after independence. This trend continued in a limited way but by 1969 there was a reduction in the number of disputes (Ministry of Labour 1969:26). Wage settlements and conditions of employment were subjected to successive Commission of Enquiries and Arbitration Tribunals from 1965 to 1975 as we will see later. The recognized union could not settle wages by itself since any negotiated settlement could spur the workers into serious agitation. In fact the MPCA often used the breakdown in wages talks to call on the workers to take industrial action. However, they had limited success in this regard.

The last agreement that the MPCA signed with the SPA prior to the 1964 strike was in March 1963 for the period January 1962 to December 31, 1963. It represented the eleventh agreement on wages and other conditions of work which had been negotiated by the MPCA since 1945. The minimum wage for unskilled workers was pegged at \$3.45 per day at the end of 1963. As that union tried to win over the workers by taking an aggressive position at negotiations following the 1964 strike, the employer took a tougher stance in refusing to offer any increase because of the adverse impact the strike had on the industry. The talks were deadlocked at conciliation, presided over by a senior official from the Ministry of Labour. The positions of the SPA and the MPCA were not close enough to bring about a satisfactory resolution of the dispute over wages, profit sharing, and bonus.

## Commission of Inquiry

The Governor intervened on the advice of the Minister of Labour and appointed on June 29, 1965, a high powered commission headed by Justice Percival Cummings, with the following terms of reference:

to enquire into the existing dispute between the British Guiana Sugar Producers' Association and the Man Power Citizens' Association in connection with (1) wages and conditions of employment in respect of the years 1964 and 1965; (2) the payment of a once -for-all bonus for 1964; (3) the payment of an annual production bonus for 1964; and to report thereon, and to make such recommendations as it may deem expedient (Cummings 1965: 1).

In terms of wages, the MPCA was seeking an increase in the minimum wage to \$4.00 for the existing 8 hour work day with consequential adjustments in the other grades. Because of the seasonal nature of the work, the union also sought to introduce a minimum wage of no less than \$20.00 for the week, representing five days pay in 1964. The SPA and MPCA agreed that the parties should allow the Commission to adjudicate on wages for 1965 and, as a consequence, a further 50 cents per day and a 12.5 per cent increase for all piece rated jobs was sought by the union, in addition to the bonus issues. These wage claims for 1964 were still in dispute some eighteen months after the rates should have been put into effect.

However, protracted negotiations and discussions on important issues and grievances had been a regular but undesirable feature in the industrial relations practice in the sugar industry. In addition, the delay had to do with developments during 1964. The MPCA started negotiations with the SPA in November 1963. During the course of the discussions, the GAWU recognition strike commenced, and negotiations were thereafter suspended. The MPCA was then struck off the roll of registered trade unions in August 1964 for its failure to comply with certain statutory requirements. The union challenged the decision of the registrar of trade unions in the Supreme Court, which ruled in its favour in September 1964. Discussions with the SPA followed this and resulted in an agreement in November 1964 over Once For All

Bonus for the year 1963 (ibid.24).

With respect to 1964 the union argued that the SPA had the ability to pay despite the disruptions as a result of the strike. The argument was founded on a formula which the union claimed existed and was based on the price it received for sugar sold on the open and US markets. The union estimated that the SPA owed the workers \$4.2m in bonus alone. The SPA denied that any formula existed and maintained its inability to pay despite the fact that the industry was able to sustain its profit levels. It took the position that the overall profitability of the industry did not justify the payment of a bonus. Additionally, the workers did not achieve their target because they failed to take up work which was available to them. Further, the wages and other benefits which were paid to them compared favourably to wages paid to workers in other industries at the national level. Given the poor marketing prospects and drop in production, the SPA argued that if an increase in wages was given, it could endanger the viability of the industry (ibid: 32).

At the end of the deliberations the Commission was unanimous in its recommendations that the industry was unable to meet any wage increase at that point in time. It suggested that the parties should examine the possibility of negotiating wage increases for 1966. It also made recommendations for the payment of \$451,680 as production bonus, and \$867,252 as 'once for all' bonus, with the introduction of a Profit Sharing Scheme to replace the 'once for all' bonus. Other proposals by the commission included an increase in the local selling price of sugar, along with the withdrawal of nearly \$1m from the Price Stabilisation Fund, established in 1947, to cushion the shortfall in prices received for sugar sold on the foreign markets outside of the NPQ (1) and to compensate for the shortfall in production due to the strike (ibid).

While the SPA accepted most of the recommendations, the MPCA rejected them as being insufficient. It must be borne in mind that since this was merely an advisory commission as distinct from an arbitration tribunal, there was no way in which the MPCA could have been forced into accepting any or all of the recommendations

made. With this deadlock, there was the possibility that the workers would express their frustration via strike action. This stalemate brought the Prime Minister onto the scene. His intervention resulted in an agreement for the payment of a total sum of \$1,138,932 to all the workers as Annual Production Bonus for 1964. These payments were financed by the Price Stabilisation Fund and not from earnings of the industry. The Prime Minister also indicated that a Commission would be appointed to inquire into all aspects of the sugar industry, with the SPA and MPCA allowed to nominate a person each.

Eventually, on 9th May, 1967, His Excellency, the Governor General appointed Justice Guya Persaud as Chairman with six other persons as Commissioners under the Commissions of Inquiry Ordinance (Chapter 59) with a mandate:

to inquire into and report upon all aspects of the sugar industry in Guyana into its widest sense with special reference to:-

- (a) the general economic situation of the industry taking account of all relevant relationship with other industries or undertakings;
- (b) the wage and salary increases paid with effect from 1st January, 1965, the profits of the industry from all its operations in that year and the formula recommended by the Cummings' Report for the use of the Price Stabilisation Fund;
- (c) the payment of a once for all bonus for 1965;
- (d) the payment of increased wages and salaries for 1966;
- (e) other conditions of employment; and
- (f) its organisation with particular reference to the development of cane farming by small operators ; and to make recommendations (Guya Persaud 1968).

This Commission had the widest possible scope despite the fact that its findings were not binding on any of the parties involved in the sugar industry. The views of all interested organisations had been canvassed. The only two unions in the industry which declined to give evidence or submit memoranda were the GAWU and NAACIE. The NAACIE Officials felt that they had more to benefit if they pursued representation by themselves, given the disunity among the other unions and the weak positions of some of their leaders. The strategy worked for NAACIE since that union secured higher increases in its negotiations during that period. However, the refusal of

the GAWU to present its case for recognition to the Persaud's Commission, reputed to be one of the most crucial for the industry, can be seen as a tactical error.

Although the GAWU did not participate in its work, the Commission pronounced that MPCA was losing its membership to NAACIE and GAWU and that this defection by workers "still nominally represented by the MPCA to NAACIE is also a factor" (Guya Persaud 1968: 95) in the instability in the industrial relations climate. Further, the Commission recognized that the strenuous efforts made by GAWU since 1963 in securing recognition, had a "significant impact on the state of labour- management relations in the sugar industry" (ibid: 86).

From all the evidence available, it is clear that if the GAWU had been more tactical between the period 1963-1967, recognition would have been secured much earlier than in 1976. Some weaknesses on the part of the GAWU have been discussed in the earlier chapter. Their refusal to appear in front of the Commission and to outline their case despite being requested to do so, represents a further example of both tactical and strategic ineptitude. It was not the case that the Commission was empowered to make a determination on the issue, but the opportunity for GAWU to present its case was lost. More public sympathy was likely to have been evident if the case of the sugar workers had been taken up at the level of the Commission. At least the Commission was heavily used by the MPCA to state its case for the agency shop. It also argued that the GAWU's recognition claim was politically motivated and that the GAWU was engaged in terror tactics and coercion to secure the support of sugar workers.

On the question of the agency shop, which the MPCA had advocated since 1958, the union made a major breakthrough. Although the recommendation was not for the application of a full scale agency shop, the Commission recommended that the parties should engage in discussions towards implementing "union security provisions based on voluntary but irrevocable check-off dues"(ibid:141). What was intended was that once a worker agreed to become a member of the union s/he could not revoke union membership until the expiration of the life of the agreement. Luckily, the SPA



recognised the serious implications, legally and otherwise, and rigidly opposed the application of any such system. As we have seen, the Crane arbitration tribunal (1975) effectively pronounced against the agency shop, closed shop or any compulsory union dues paying scheme, in the sugar industry. To date, no compulsory dues paying scheme has been implemented in the sugar industry, despite the fact that there have been slight modifications in the law which allowed its application in some government agencies in the early 1980s, especially for the unions which were supportive of the PNC Government.

On the question of a wage settlement the Commission recommended a 8.3 per cent increase or 30 cents per day on the minimum wage from the 1st January, 1966. That increase brought the new minimum wage to \$3.90 per day. The implementation of this increase followed the signing of an agreement between the MPCA and SPA on October 16, 1968. The 30 cents increase which the workers obtained, brought the total wage increase between 1961 and 1967 to 90 cents per day. An examination of nine leading companies operating in the country during the same period revealed that the sugar workers' wage rates and the awarded pay increases were the lowest. The bauxite workers had received \$2.00 more on the minimum wage during the same period, making their daily minimum wage \$9.20. The rice workers had their wages moved from \$2.84 to \$4.00 per day, an increase of \$1.16. Leading commercial stores had paid their workers between \$1.20 to \$2.24 more per day and their minimum wage in 1967 was between \$4.24 and \$5.80 per day. At this time, the electricity workers received 54 cents more than the sugar workers while their minimum was \$5.20 per day.

There was, however, a marked inequality in wages dispensation arising from the increases paid to ancillary firms of the companies operating within the sugar industry. For instance, the workers at Sprostons, a subsidiary of Demerara Company, secured wage increases of \$1.60 as against the 90 cents received by sugar workers. The Sprostons minimum wage was \$5.36 per day. The workers at Bookers Stores, a subsidiary of Bookers Sugar Estates, enjoyed a minimum wage of \$5.04 per day and were awarded increases more than two times greater- \$1.84 - than that given to their

counterparts in sugar, while the sugar handlers at the waterfront enjoyed an increase of \$1.78 with a minimum wage in 1967 of \$5.74 (Ministry of Labour Records).

The representatives were well aware of this disparity in wage awards, and many claimed that the compensation took place by virtue of the fact that they were working close to home, that they could have done some farming on plots provided by the estates and could also fish and cut grass for their cattle at the back lands. In addition to these points, they enjoyed overtime payments, and in case of job rated employees, they could finish their task and go home early, while bonus and other incentives plus house lots and interest free housing loans were important considerations for continuing their service to the industry. Most of the points raised about extra benefits have often been made by the SPA during negotiations and at enquiries over working conditions in the industry.

The fact remains that the sugar workers were aware of the extent of their exploitation and continued to express their dissatisfaction through strike actions. They were conscious of their consolidated strength and during the period of union rivalry they would often play one union against the other. When I interviewed union representatives much later, they explained that because both the GAWU and the MPCA would seek to out do each other, the workers would very often make their positions known through the use of the strike weapon which would force the unions to take up the issue. This method led to a complete breakdown in the industrial relations procedure in the sugar industry. As a consequence, the vast majority of the work stoppages which took place were categorized as unofficial strikes. The Guya Persaud Commission (1968: 91) found that there was a marked breakdown of discipline of the organised work force, due the strategy which workers deployed. It recognised that the "workers are shrewd enough to realize" that there was not a likelihood of disciplinary action being taken against them for their action, given the prevailing climate of inter - union conflict. Therefore, the workers were not only engaging in protest action at the end of the life of the wage agreement but they very often attempted to extract extra money for work which they claimed to have involved "obstacles".

There were varying claims by workers, especially those on job rates, at different locations, and at different times. As the success story spread to other locations the workers carefully timed their action and, very often with the assistance of assessors from the Ministry of Labour, secured some additional payment. A representative from the former '14b Cane Cutting Gang' at Vryhied's Lust explained that in an effort to secure a decent day's pay the workers would strike for two or three days and when the cane became 'lighter', they would then get additional money for cutting it. They would work hard for three days and found that the wages earned under that system would be equivalent to what they would get for work during a normal week. As such there was a situation of almost weekly strikes in that gang, during the late 1960s (Interview: August 1994). It is clear from the investigations that workers found ways to circumvent what they considered to be inadequate wage settlements. This was the situation throughout the period of the MPCA/GAWU conflict and it has continued without any sign of a resolution. For piece rated employees any small issue could be blown out of proportion leading to work disruption. While the signing of agreements served a useful purpose, that alone was insufficient since it was the local managers and representatives who had to work towards the maintenance of a harmonious industrial climate.

### **NAACIE Attempts At Unity**

It was clear from the 1964 strike that the MPCA still had some support in the Sugar factories. But many workers were uneasy at the state of disunity within the sugar industry and the demoralising effect of previous strikes. A number of them from the factories approached NAACIE (formerly SECA up to May 1966) seeking representation. By the middle of 1966 the union took the decision to accept the workers as members. NAACIE Receipt books and membership forms were made available to the local Branches of the Union to aid the recruitment drive. This decision was taken following a petition by 102 workers from the Area Workshop at Albion who were seeking to join NAACIE, and a report from Rose Hall representative John Ali that 80 workers from the Mechanical Tillage and 210 factory workers had already taken a decision to become members of NAACIE. S Jokai, Jeet

Persaud, T.Ram and Amin Ally also reported that quite a large section of the workforce on their locations, especially from the factory and workshop areas, had approached them to become members of the union (NAACIE Minutes 1966). Messrs Ali and Jokai then moved and seconded respectively that NAACIE accept into its membership all workers desirous of becoming members, with special reference to sugar workers. The motion was carried by 12 votes with two abstentions. Membership fees had also been set at \$2.00 per year pending recognition (ibid).

It became clear to the MPCA that the factory workers in particular were ready to break ranks and join NAACIE. The MPCA sought cover from the TUC with whom it lodged a complaint against NAACIE. It also sent to the TUC copies of NAACIE documents which were in circulation among the sugar workers. This provoked a letter from the TUC to NAACIE on 25 November-1966, which urged that the poaching of another affiliate should be discontinued. The NAACIE merely acknowledged receipt of the letter. The Versailles Branch of NAACIE had submitted a motion to the Executive Council urging that the union should invite all the unions in the sugar industry to a meeting to explore the possibility of uniting all the workers in the industry. The Executive Council agreed that meetings be initiated with the other unions. However, in view of the overwhelming requests by the sugar workers for NAACIE to represent them, the union decided that it should continue the organising programme (NAACIE Minutes December 1966) already initiated.

The Area Field Workshop was a new entity and was not covered under the MPCA recognition agreement. On April 11, 1967 NAACIE dispatched a letter to the SPA seeking recognition of the Area Work Shop employees. At that time it had the support of over 80 per cent of the workers. The SPA rejected the application the following day on the grounds that those workers belonged to the MPCA categories. This was followed by an exchange of several letters between the parties. Pressure was also mounted by the TUC on NAACIE during the same period, over repeated complaints by the MPCA against NAACIE's successful recruitment drive, as confirmed by the Guya Persaud Commission (1968: 90). The TUC had pointed out to NAACIE that the union's conduct in recruiting members from a sister affiliate was not in keeping

with the spirit of solidarity within the TUC. At the same time a NAACIE motion failed to attract the order paper for the TUC conference. NAACIE believed that Richard Ishmael, the President of the TUC, and also the President of the MPCA had a hand in ducking the motion on the issue of Union recognition for sugar workers. The union insisted that it would suspend the payment of affiliation fees to the TUC and requested a copy of the Rules of that body. The motion was eventually put on the order paper but debate on it was denied because the Chairman ruled that it was received late.

The initiative by the NAACIE to invite the other unions to discuss the issue of unity was met with hostility by the MPCA and the Headmen Unions. The GAWU expressed in no uncertain way that it was still going to pursue the issue of recognition, and its political arm, the PPP, launched a counter offensive against the NAACIE's campaign, which by the third week had attracted 2,000 new members. As Audrey Chase explained :

the success of the campaign greatly alarmed certain political circles. There was positive intervention by them and in order to prevent further division of the workers, the campaign was called off to chagrin of many workers, who for the first time felt a ray of hope ...To have had to struggle against the SPA, the MPCA and at the same time to be under attacks from misguided obstructionists, were in the circumstances too much. It was felt that the newly fought for recognition of NAACIE had pointed the way to circumventing the hurdles which the GAWU ... had for many years been unable to overcome. Yet this opportunity was not grasped but was pilloried on the alter of selfishness, a far cry from the class consciousness that should have been exhibited in this crucial move to unite all sugar workers in one industrial union (1971 :52).

NAACIE, therefore, made a retreat in order to maintain the fraternal link it enjoyed with the GAWU. In fact Bertis Bangaree, NAACIE's General Secretary, appointed to that post in July 1965, had returned from a PPP scholarship in Moscow in 1964 and soon afterwards was appointed Field Secretary. Ashton Chase, another former PPP Labour Minister, became the General President of the union. His appointment created quite a stir at the SPA level. He was denied the right to represent workers and it took strike action in April 1966 before the SPA finally accorded him the right to be present as part of the union's negotiating team. Given the closeness then of both

leading officers of NAACIE to the PPP, the backing away from the organising of the field and factory workers was seen by a few representatives as an act of solidarity, rather than a strategic move. Before Chase's entry as President it was alleged that Bangaree had allowed the Supervisory rank to move away from SECA to create a new Union with the hope that recognition for this group by the SPA would act as a precedent for GAWU (SECA Minutes April 1966). The charge was denied by Bangaree. However, a perusal of the records showed the ease with which the Employer was allowed to accord recognition to the Supervisors' Union. This seemed to confirm the allegations. This is what is reported:

Mr. B. Bangaree said that he believed in the unification of workers in the sugar industry, but at the same time it is the democratic right of the supervisors to organise or to join a union of their choice; and if the majority of the supervisors want to have their own union and to bargain for themselves there is nothing we can do about it. He suggested that a letter be sent to the SPA requesting that this matter be dealt with according to the SPA's policy regarding such matters. This suggestion was unanimously accepted (SECA Minutes: May 29, 1965).

When Chase joined the union there was a rear guard fight by SECA/NAACIE to prevent the SPA's recognition of the Supervisors' union, GSESA, but this failed. The recognition for supervisors was taken away from NAACIE/SECA on April 2, 1966 despite the fact that over 51 per cent of that grouping remained in the membership of SECA. In response to the de-recognition of the supervisory category, Chase's resolve was strengthened to bring all the smaller unions together. The following month the Union changed its name from SECA to become NAACIE. In addressing the conference which approved the change of name in May 1966, this is what Chase had to say:

Small trade unions have no place in the sugar industry. We are dealing with people who have plenty of influence and power and even authority in this country. Even though political changes (independence granted from Britain, May 26, 1966) are going to take place in two weeks, their influence and power and authority will still be manifest and will still be exerted in the new society.... The only alternative is for all the workers in the sugar industry to close their ranks and to get together in one solid organisation in the same way as the sugar magnets are organised in the SPA (Audrey Chase 1971: 51).

Yet despite this passionate appeal, NAACIE was pressured to walk away from the bulk of sugar workers and allow GAWU its way. The Union therefore, was to put its energy towards unifying the administrative groups.

### **The Absorption of Three Unions**

The SECA members had since 1963 faced the problem of not being accepted into the ranks of the Sugar Boilers Union. The Guyana and West Indies Sugar Boilers Union (GWISBU) had taken a decision only to accept qualified sugar boilers into its ranks. That union was insisting that only the sugar boilers should be appointed process foremen. The SECA members from the laboratory were competent to fill that position and in fact were appointed from time to time to that position. Whenever there was a vacancy for the position of Process Foreman, the management would pick a suitable candidate from either the laboratory or the pan floor area. This procedure by management resulted in a number of process foremen without union representation. In one instance, at Wales in 1963, the sugar boilers went on a protest strike over the appointment of a SECA member to the position of process foreman. The management felt he was the most suitable candidate but the sugar boilers were insisting on having one from their ranks appointed.

This incident resulted in an exchange of letters between the two unions. The GWISBU maintained its position that it could not accept anyone but a qualified sugar boiler into its ranks, and that position was in keeping with the constitution of that union. SECA took the decision to organise within the ranks of the sugar boilers (SECA Minutes, April 1964). But the progress was very slow and at times divisive. It was not until the late 1960s that momentum developed. With Chase and Bangaree at the helm, the union assumed a militant and progressive role. Chase brought his skills, reputation and dynamic leadership to NAACIE. There were several factors which influenced the changes which have occurred among the smaller unions. First, at the legal level Chase successfully piloted a test case, *Boodhoo Dwarka v Demerara Co Ltd.*, for double time payment for work done on Sundays and certain holidays under

the factories ordinance. The decision was handed down in March 1969 and had retroactive effect to 1961. This was followed by a similar case on behalf of supervisors, *D R Singh v Enmore Estates*, which again secured benefits for the workers. Second, the union, after a bitter 38 days general strike, concluded an agreement to incorporate the benefits of the legal decision in addition to a five day 40 hours work week for clerical workers and other substantial fringe benefits to workers. Third, the Branches of the union became more combative and organised. In some cases they had reached the enviable 100 per cent union membership. Fourth, the union itself had become very viable in financial terms. It had wiped out its mortgage on its Headquarters from donations by members who had benefitted from retroactive payment as a result of negotiations (Audrey Chase 1971: Chapter 9).

These developments resulted in workers in other sections joining NAACIE. Cane weighers, field checkers and security guards were the first groups to approach NAACIE. The weighers and checkers belonged to the MPCA category and that union was not prepared to release them despite the fact that their work was clerical in nature. The security guards, while they had shown some courage in struggle and had taken the bold decision to engage Chase to fight their overtime case in court (which he won), had nonetheless been manipulated into the police ranks and were told that they could not be unionised (NAACIE Minutes: February 7, 1971). Given the commitment of NAACIE to unifying the workers, constant contacts had been maintained with all the unions despite opposition from some of them. The Guyana Sugar Estate Supervisors Association (GSESA) and the Guyana Sicknurses and Dispensers Association (GSDA), almost at the same time took the decision to amalgamate with NAACIE.

The absence on leave of the GSDA President prevented the process of amalgamation from taking place at the same time with the Supervisors. The GSESA, which was registered in 1966 and obtained recognition from the SPA in June 1966, held its Annual Conference in early 1971, where delegates discussed a letter from NAACIE which invited a merger. There was approval for the merger to take place. NAACIE members also gave their approval and the documents for the merger were



authenticated by the Registrar of Trade Unions in May 1971. Four days later, on May 18th, the SPA was notified of the merger and was asked to treat with NAACIE as the new bargaining agent. However, the SPA requested a meeting with NAACIE following which it set out conditions which were considered to be provocative, as terms which would govern the relationship (NAACIE Minutes:15/6/71).

The SPA wanted to create a separate bargaining unit for the Supervisors while the NAACIE was insisting on a relationship where the union would continue to bargain as a single unit, similar to what existed prior to the split. Following some industrial strife and the intervention of the Minister of Labour, the NAACIE was accorded recognition of the GSESA members on September 30, 1971. The mechanisms for the amalgamation between NAACIE and the GSDA were completed almost a year after the decision was taken for a merger by the latter body. The Registrar of Trade Unions approved the merger on August 3, 1972. The SPA was in no mood to readily accept NAACIE as the sole bargaining agent for this group of workers. It argued that NAACIE should have notified it before the merger took place. This response was no doubt intended to curb the wave of requests by other groups. An application for recognition had already been forwarded by NAACIE for sugar boilers in November 1971.

The leaders of the GWISBU had turned down a request by their members to enter into a merger pact with NAACIE. The sugar boilers' union had in fact been well established not only in Guyana but was a craft union which had members in other Caribbean Sugar Producing Countries. It had recognition rights with the Sugar industry since May 1950 and also enjoyed a very close relationship with the leadership of the TUC. It always sided with MPCA at the TUC level. Its members claimed that the union was ineffective and was not operating in a democratic manner. When the NAACIE's request for recognition was made, the GWISBU lodged a complaint of poaching against NAACIE to the TUC.

The parent body requested a meeting of the two unions but many sugar boilers had responded to the TUC through a petition stating that it was their desire to become

members of NAACIE and that the union was merely responding to their requests. NAACIE also denied poaching allegations as malicious and unfounded (NAACIE Minutes, December 19, 1971). The SPA also chose the same time to begin negotiations with the GWISBU. This prompted NAACIE to lodge a protest to the SPA and warn that it would not be bound by any agreement entered into between the SPA and the GWISBU (ibid). The SPA also requested a survey to be conducted by the Ministry of Labour on NAACIE records to see if its claim could be verified. The Ministry found that NAACIE had in fact over 50 per cent of the sugar boiling categories as members and notified the SPA accordingly. Pressure by the Union compelled the SPA to serve notice terminating the recognition agreement it had with the GWISBU. That decision was criticized by the TUC, whose disciplinary committee had summoned a meeting of the two unions. NAACIE did not turn up to the meeting. The Ministry of Labour was coerced by the TUC, resulting in a letter being dispatched to the SPA by the said Ministry. It requested that the SPA stay their hands on the matter pending some inquiries into allegations made by the GWISBU over misinterpretation of its Rules by the Ministry. The legal advisor of the Ministry was called in while the TUC demanded a meeting with that body. The General Secretary of the MPCA and the Secretary of the TUC represented the interests of the GWISBU.

The NAACIE had to shift its pressure on to the Ministry of Labour, and following an exchange of letters between the union and the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry deemed a NAACIE letter offensive and requested its withdrawal before any further action could be taken on the issue. NAACIE insisted that its position was correct and the Ministry eventually sent a letter dated June 13, 1972 giving the go ahead to SPA to proceed with the matter. However the SPA, while taking action to terminate the recognition agreement with GWISBU, was again insisting on separate Bargaining Units. The stalemate between the parties came almost at the same time after all documentation had been concluded in the merger between NAACIE and GSDA. The SPA also took a similar position with respect to the Dispensers grouping. At the same time talks between the NAACIE and the SPA for salary increases to clerical and supervisory workers had reached a deadlock. It was therefore a ripe moment for NAACIE to combine all the issues and launch an offensive against the employer.

On September 22, 1972 NAACIE served a seventy-two hour notice on the SPA to take industrial action over the breakdown in wages talks and the failure to secure recognition for the two groups of workers. A general strike was called by NAACIE from September 26. When it ended on October 9, 1972, both groups, the Dispersers and Sugar Boiling had been given recognition as members of NAACIE. When the recognition agreement and the terms of resumption agreement had been signed between the NAACIE and the SPA, the number of unions in the industry had been reduced to three. The other two were the MPCA and the Guyana Headmen Union (GHU), which later changed its name to Guyana Field Foremen and Supervisors Union (GFF&SU).

The members of the GHU made repeated requests to become members of NAACIE shortly afterwards, but the SPA never allowed the recognition requests to get past their offices. The President and Secretary of that union were the same office bearers in the MPCA and the offices were all located in one building. Therefore, efforts on the part of the employers to preserve them within the industry had to do with those unions' willingness to continue to serve as company unions. Only decisive action on the part of the foremen would have liberated them, but they were not prepared for such a struggle and they were not very popular among the other groups of workers, because of their spineless nature in previous struggles. Effective solidarity action was not envisaged. The NAACIE decided that it would continue to work among that group to sensitise them to the need to struggle. While that process was taking place and during the course of NAACIE's efforts to absorb the other sections of the workforce, the field and factory workers were engaging the employers for their right to be given a union of their choice.

### **The Fresh Wave of Struggles: Field and Factory Workers**

On March 18, 1968, Leonora workers struck for 17 days for increments, before their jobs were reclassified. About fifty per cent of the workers benefitted from increases due to increments. At the neighbouring Uitvlugt location workers went on strike for higher wages from March 19 to April 4 1968. Their demand was rejected on the

grounds that they had to await the outcome of the Report of the Guya Persand Committee appointed in 1969. The delay of this report resulted in a country wide strike on all the Estate locations from August 10, 1968 to August 27, 1968 resulting in a loss of 88,000 working days approximately.

This strike was followed by another one in November for 17 days (November 4-20) on eight locations; Albion, Port Mourant, Blairmont, Enmore, LBI, Ogle and Versailles, for the fixing of a date for the pay out. The Government announced a date and the strike was called off (Ministry of Labour Report; 28:29). The year 1969 also witnessed the appointment of a trade union leader, Winslow Carrington, as Minister of Labour and he conducted numerous reforms at his Ministry. He initiated dialogue with all the unions, including GAWU, as well as employers organisations and pursued a policy of preventive action as far as industrial disputes were concerned. To this end, the Ministry increased the number of officers serving districts in which there were sugar estates. An 'early warning' system was established and special attention paid to endemic causes of disputes - for example, there had been a number of disputes originating with problems over the weighing of canes. Hence, a system of checking weights and scales was established (ibid: 26).

The Minister intensified discussions with all the unions in the industry, irrespective of recognition, on issues affecting workers and held discussions with both the TUC and the Consultative Association of Guyanese Industry (CAGI) for the introduction of a Trade Disputes Bill which would provide for the establishment of an Industrial Court, although these never materialised. He further advocated a greater degree of workers' participation in management, with emphasis on the public sector and public corporations. He argued that the process of joint consultation must be advanced, obviously conscious that the attitude of leaving out the GAWU from vital discussions was having a negative impact on the industry. His strategy to involve that union seemed to have paid dividend.

By the end of 1969, there was an overall reduction in the work days lost during strikes in the entire country - 38,450 as against 306,009 for 1968 (ibid: 27). Sugar production

had also achieved the highest level ever (364,465 tons) only to be overtaken in 1971 when the highest production achieved was 368,843 tons of sugar. Disputes at conciliation were processed much faster and the Minister was also engaged in meeting the parties to disputes, whenever there was a deadlock. 1970 was marred by three major strikes which were, incidentally, started by the MPCA on 9th March and which lasted for six days. The strikes were called following the breakdown in negotiations with the SPA for increased wages and profit sharing for 1969 and 1970. These strikes were significant in the sense that they happened in a tense period of inter-union rivalry. That a union which was being challenged could call a general strike and attract the support of 11,463 workers was a very good showing by any standard. The days lost as a result numbered 49,177 with wages amounting to \$261,308 lost. This dispute ended up at the level of Arbitration.

### **The Arbitration Tribunal**

The Clifton Lowachee Arbitration Tribunal, consisting of a panel of three, was set up in March 1970, during the course of a general strike by workers in the industry. It followed the breakdown of negotiations over wages and profit sharing for 1969 and 1970. The tribunal was established after the intervention of the Prime Minister acting on the advice of his Cabinet. Before the setting up of the tribunal, both the MPCA and SPA agreed to an interim pay-out of nearly \$3m as an inducement for the workers to resume work. The ruling of the tribunal came after thirty one meetings, lasting several months. During the month of September workers took strike action over the delay in securing wage increases. This action encouraged the release of an interim report, on September 30, 1970, which was supplemented by a detailed report two weeks later.

The MPCA, on the one hand, requested an increase from \$3.90 per day to \$4.25 as the minimum wage from January 1, 1969 and \$4.50 per day for 1970. These increases, they argued, should apply before profit sharing is paid. The SPA, on the other hand, wanted \$4.00 and \$4.10 for the same periods in addition to profit sharing (Lowachee 1970: 180). The tribunal ruled in favour of \$4.25 per day from 1969 and the equivalent of a 8.9743 per cent increase to apply to all piece- or job- rated

employees as well as those on time- rate above the minimum rate of pay. The September strike resulted in no increase being awarded for 1970 and the tribunal was emphatic about not awarding any increase for that reason. It estimated that the strike cost the country \$4m in revenue, \$12m in foreign exchange and loss of wages of about \$2.5m (ibid: 152). The tribunal was also very critical over what it considered to be lack of facilities to speed up the settlement of disputes and the unnecessary use of the strike weapon by workers. Parts of its pronouncements are reproduced hereunder:

Some of these matters may appear trivial, but if the numbers of strikes and of committees of enquiry in the past ten years are any testimony of the state of affairs existing in the industry then there is something definitely wrong with the policies being pursued and/or with the attitudes of those involved. If the industry (management and union) is unable to find a solution to the unsettled conditions, then it is imperative that governmental action be taken without delay to prevent any further waste of the country's resources, by imposing on disputants machinery for the speedy and impartial settlement of the differences. Trials of strength are wasteful and costly to the economy... The labour movement continues to think that its strength lies in strikes. This may be true if strikes were cost free and were labour's only remedy. But, in fact, they are not (ibid: 152, 168).

It was the first such award which directly penalized the workers for taking strike action. Unfortunately, the parties to the dispute and the government were apparently only interested in the immediate resolution of the conflict. The issues with respect to wages and profit sharing were addressed, and the struggles by workers continued, with no effort being made to establish proper machinery for the resolution of disputes between management and the workers. However, workers suffered by this tribunal ruling for 1970 because they were agitating for wage increases which should have been implemented twenty one months earlier. The late resolution of wage claims had been commented on by previous commission reports (Guya Persaud 1968). If heed had been taken of such comments the workers might have been less restive and major disruptions might have been avoided.

The award of the Lowachee tribunal was also in sharp contrast to what the Industrial Court awarded the sugar workers of Trinidad for the same period and what was agreed upon between the Barbados Workers Union and the sugar planters for workers

in Barbados. Both Trinidad and Barbados produced less sugar than Guyana but supplied the same markets, purchased spares and other equipment from the same suppliers and operated under similar conditions. Yet as we see from table 3.1 below, workers in those countries enjoyed greater wage increases and levels than their Guyanese counter parts. The progressive wage movements over the years in those countries within the Caribbean resulted in superior wages and conditions when compared with the Guyanese sugar workers, whose conditions in the 1930s had surpassed those in the other West Indian Colonies (Giglioli 1938: 3).

Lowachee was also appointed sole Arbitrator for the years 1971 to 1973, after the MPCA and the GSPA failed to reach an agreement following conciliatory talks at the Ministry of Labour. For these three years the workers were awarded increases of 5% 1971; 5% 1972; and 7% 1973. These increases moved the minimum wage from \$4.25 in 1970 to \$5.01 per day in 1973. The significant feature of this tribunal was the speed with which it completed its work. What took place was that the MPCA and SPA agreed to refer their disputes over wages and profit sharing to Arbitration under section 4 (1) (c) of the Labour Ordinance. This enabled the Minister to appoint the tribunal, once he was satisfied that the dispute was injurious to the national interest. By this process the cost was borne by the Ministry of Labour and not the Parties to the dispute.

**Table 4. 1: Wage Increases**

Year	Barbados	Trinidad	Guyana
1969	10%	10%	8.9%
1970	12.5%	7%	-
1971	15%	5%	5%
1972	20%	12.5%	5%
Total	57.5%	34.5%	18.9%

Sources. Lowachee Reports, 1970; 1972.

Guya Persaud Report, 1968.

The previous Lowachee Tribunal was similarly appointed. If the Tribunal was set up in accordance with the provisions of the Collective Agreement between the SPA and the MPCA, then the cost had to be shared equally between the parties, and the person(s) so appointed had to be agreed upon. The process in which the Minister was allowed to select the tribunal was to avoid delay over haggling over names. The incentive to the MPCA was its savings in such a costly process. The union was already under severe financial constraints with the decline in its membership.

Lowachee, was once more appointed as lone arbitrator in June 1972, and following the exchange of memoranda by the parties on June 20th, a hearing was held the next day in private to conclude the matter. There was some additional written information supplied to the Arbitrator, who submitted his report on July 7, 1972, exactly one month after his appointment. This was the shortest period within which any tribunal has ruled on the question of wages and only after one sitting. There were no disputes in 1973, for though the wage settlement would normally have been for 1972 the parties, at the time they accepted arbitration over their initial dispute, agreed that the year 1973 also be decided upon by the tribunal.

Some representatives were of the view that the SPA, MPCA, and the Government were merely going through the motions by allowing third party intervention. This was because of the state of industrial relations in the sugar industry and the MPCA's inability to win the confidence of the workers. Moreover, there was no serious attempt on the part of the parties to the tribunal to address the issues of the workers in a genuine way. However, a management official later explained that it was prudent to get an arbitrator who had just concluded an exhaustive investigation into the industry to adjudicate over the dispute so as to save time (Interview: October 1994). The union representatives, however, reflecting back upon this experience, claimed that what was taking place was a cover up and a mere shifting of responsibility to a third party. One senior trade union official expressed the view that the collective bargaining process was heavily undermined by having a union which did not have the respect and confidence of workers to bargain on their behalf. Because the recognition issue was not resolved, the problem of reaching an agreement around the bargaining



table was likely to continue and the services of a third party routinely required (Interview: August 1994).

## **Arbitration Tribunals Under Pressure**

Following the setting up of the Lowachee Arbitration Tribunal in 1970, nearly 6,000 workers took protest industrial action on August 17, against the delay in the proceedings of the Tribunal. This strike resulted "in the loss of 12,636 work days and \$70,254 in wages" (Ministry of Labour Report 1970:42). The GAWU was not going to be left on the sidelines when the MPCA had been able to draw some 11,500 workers on strike earlier in the year. The rivalry was causing them to seek to outdo each other. GAWU therefore decided to show its strength once again, the first on this scale since 1964. They had sensed that the workers were in a mood to struggle. They therefore prepared the foundation for another general strike by asking their representatives to participate fully in the August 17 strike and at the same time mobilised the workers for the conflict which they anticipated would follow.

They did not openly advocate anything in the August strike, since it was not as effective as the MPCA organised strike in March, lacking wider organisation as it was the workers who were flexing their muscles. It would not have been tactical for GAWU to be associated with a strike which was less effective than one called by the union they were seeking to replace. Their representatives were organising 'bottom house' meetings in the extra nuclear areas where sugar workers are consolidated. This August mini-general strike influenced the start of the Arbitration tribunal. The GAWU mobilization reached its peak during the August strike with several meetings throughout the country. Upon the heels of the mini-general strike, the workers came out in full force on September 2, with 14,118 on strike demanding the recognition of GAWU and the payment of an interim relief. The support was obviously heartening to GAWU, who had every reason to be worried that MPCA had been able to influence such a large section of the workforce earlier. This strike lasted for a total of 24 days and resulted in a loss of 139,374 work days and \$799,528 in wages to workers (ibid). There was no settlement when the union called off the strike. In fact, the employers or

the Ministry of Labour would have found it difficult to intervene since an arbitration tribunal was looking into the question of wages. This action could be seen as a response to the MPCA strike.

The anxiously awaited Lowachee Report was out on October 14, 1970. Workers had taken time to examine the benefits it brought, while earning some much needed dollars. Then on November 13, a few estates had their workers downing tools over the inadequacy of the award. Word of this action only had to reach the other estates and their workers also joined the strike, making it even larger than the one that was called for GAWU's recognition, with 15,988 workers participating. This strike had an even more serious effect on production. The Minister of Labour became personally involved and since it was a workers' strike he invited the MPCA, GAWU and SPA to a series of meeting, following which there was a full resumption on November 26, 1970. The strike resulted in a loss of 114,308 person days and wages to the sum of \$647,574 (ibid).

There were also a number of strikes on various locations where workers, especially cane cutters, were alleging that the cane scales were defective. Their demand was for an observer from their group to be present at all times to verify the weighing of the canes. This demand resulted in the election of representatives to monitor the scale as we will see later. What was also of significance was that at Albion/Port Mourant area nearly 2,500 workers took solidarity action for two days over the arrest of two PPP members in a shooting incident in which two PNC Councillors from the Sheet Anchor village were shot.

In assessing the industry's performance at the end of 1970, the Booker Chairman, Powell, had this to say "Guyana's sugar industry had a difficult year because of serious labour troubles due to rivalry between the two main unions. Both tried to show superior support by calling out their respective members, and as a result the industry lost 410,000 work days. Untimely rain added to the difficulty" (Booker Report 1970: 28). While there was a loss of production of 50,000 tons and foreign exchange loss of £2 ½m to Guyana, the industry was able to sustain a profit and in

fact achieved a production of 311,149 tons of sugar.

What was also of consequence between 1965 and 1971 was that both unions registered a reduction of paid union members by about 5000. The MPCA reported that its membership dropped from 20,000 in 1965 to 15,000 in 1970 while the GAWU membership report showed a decline from 14,565 to 10,536 for the same period, at a time when the inter union rivalry only once occurred at a national scale on sugar estates (Ministry of Labour Reports). Perhaps it was because of this inactivity that efforts were not made to go on a full scale membership drive. Under labour legislation in Guyana, the trade unions should have their books, including their membership register, audited by the Auditor General's Office, and also file Annual Returns with the Registrar of Trade Unions. The MPCA have been in default with respect to the audit of accounts for a number of years, so there was no independent verification of their membership figures. They have often been accused by the GAWU of "cooking figures" in terms of membership and when seriously challenged have been unable to even produce the check off slips from the employers to justify the 15,000 which they have registered.

The GAWU, on the other hand, is one of the few trade unions which has its books audited and because this union did not enjoy the check off system, the 10,000 financial members was a remarkable achievement. Without formal recognition their method of collection was based on the individual worker paying up to organizers and representatives at various locations. However, the drop in membership had to be worrying to GAWU given the militancy of the workers and their loyalty to this union. With respect to the MPCA all that took place was a sudden drop in membership from 20,000 to 15,000. The 20,000 was recorded for several years and when the reduction took place, the 15,000 was also reflected in the records for a few years. It was not possible for the MPCA to have that consistent membership figure, while representing a seasonal workforce with changes in employment patterns. The GAWU on the other hand showed variation in membership, again suggesting the much greater veracity of their records.

## MPCA on the Course of Defeat

The MPCA, banking on its success in early 1970, tried to organise another general strike on February 22, 1971. This strike call was no doubt intended to counter the support of GAWU call of late 1970. It ended as a disaster for the MPCA, because it demonstrated that they were unable to mobilise action even around the issue of higher wages, which they always regarded as that which gave them the best chance of success. The battle lines had been drawn. My investigations have disclosed that the workers were advised by the leadership of GAWU not to heed any further call by the MPCA (Interviews: October 1994). At the same time the workers' problems were increasingly given some attention through their representatives, as the Ministry of Labour adopted a more 'hands on' approach to tackling disputes in the industry. Additionally, the records show that agricultural assessors were employed by the Ministry of Labour, visiting strike areas whenever there were disputes regarding pricing and seeking to resolve them with the representatives of the workers and management. Inch by inch the power of the MPCA to settle matters for the workers was eroded and then finally, in 1971, the cane cutters, after years of agitation, were allowed to elect their representatives to be cane scale supervisors for the purpose of round the clock checks on the weighing of canes at various factories.

Genuine workers' representatives won all the positions, thus humiliating the MPCA in areas where it was possible for them to put up rival candidates. "We cut dey ass all over" was how one representative put it (ibid). The signal was clear that the employers would have to deal with a more militant and conscious workforce and hence address the issue of recognition in a serious way. The majority of field representatives interviewed, claimed that there have been occasions when the workers were getting angry with the GAWU because their claim for recognition was not pursued in a vigorous and systematic way. At times they pointed out that the GAWU was merely responding to the MPCA and workers militancy (ibid).

Sensing some discontent, an attempt was made by the government to bring another union into the industry, this time one supportive of the ruling PNC. The Union of

Agricultural and Allied Workers (UAAW) announced its intention to organise in the industry. This union, which was allegedly funded by the ruling party, had at its helm a defector from GAWU, its former Assistant General Secretary, Selo Baichan, who previously worked in the sugar industry. There was a rude rejection for the union. It could not make inroads anywhere, not even at the location, Vryheid's Lust, where Baichan previously worked, and it quickly shifted gear to a few Government work locations where recognition was granted without the majority of workers' consent. The UAAW then exited from the sugar industry.

Apart from the failed attempt of the MPCA earlier in 1971 to call a general strike, there was no other major strike for the year. The GAWU did not have to respond to the MPCA, but there were sporadic work stoppages on the estates for a short duration, most of them lasting one day. The industry in 1971 recorded its largest production ever, 368,843 tons of sugar. Then GAWU again registered its presence in the industry with a series of strikes for recognition in February and March 1972 on various locations. The strikers were demanding more than recognition. They wanted profit sharing for 1971, a 25 per cent increase in wages, house lots and the early setting of targets for annual production bonus, with the involvement of GAWU. This was not an all out strike at every location at the same time. It was a "hit and run tactic" being deployed by GAWU, as was recalled by a number of representatives. The disruption in the industry lasted 16 days with the involvement of 11,499 workers at a loss of 30,062 person days and \$188,977 in wages (Report of Ministry of Labour. 1972).

On this strategy, the representatives asserted that the GAWU was not waiting for an answer, neither were there meetings at either the Ministry of Labour or at the SPA level to pursue representation on any of the demands. They simply made their point and moved on, as an effective underground movement will do. In any event on any matter the workers' representatives had access to the Ministry of Labour, while their leaders had direct audience with the Minister of Labour. It was heavily rumoured around the industry in 1973 that, following some informal discussions between the leaders of GAWU and the Minister, arrangements would be put in train for the recognition of GAWU (2). Some of the workers I interviewed much later mentioned

that GAWU, while not being an affiliate of the TUC, was involved in many meetings with the Minister on issues he had to discuss with organized labour (Interview: October 1994). This claim is substantiated by the records of the Ministry of Labour (Ministry of Labour Report 1970).

Apparently with the assurances of recognition, the GAWU was requested to display some restraint in its action. The year 1973 passed as a relatively quiet one for the industry although the minor work stoppages continued. Workers continued to experience frustration, with their demands for higher wages and benefits unheeded, and all they received were benefits negotiated by the MPCA through the intervention of third parties, either an Advisory Committee or Arbitration. At the local level, workers banded together to combat any wrong doing by the estate's management, with the collaboration of clerks and other junior staff employees, who were members of NAACIE, and the field and factory workers. There was joint solidarity action by all those workers for a short duration on various locations against management's arbitrary policies (NAACIE Minutes: 1973). In fact, the coordination of solidarity action by the several groups of workers at Albion Estate created near chaos at that location in 1973, to the extent that the Minister of Labour was forced to set up a committee of enquiry early in 1974 to investigate charges laid by workers representatives against the Personnel Manager, Anthony Downes. There were calls also for his removal from the Estate (Semple Report 1974).

The relative restraint with which the recognition dispute was handled by GAWU since 1969 can be examined in the light of (a) the Government's apparent concern for workers' rights since the appointment of Carrington as Labour Minister and (b) the Government's "anti-imperialist" posturing, despite the fact that it had engaged in dubious actions in seeking power at the 1968 General Elections. Then Burnham began talking of "ownership and control of our national resources and had served notice since 1970 of our intention to miniaturise foreign owned banks and to make the Guyana National Co-operative Bank, the bank for mobilising and deploying Guyanese savings in Guyana" (Burnham 1974:25).

The PNC also tabled a Trade Disputes Bill in 1969, which the Minister claimed was "designed to cause management and unions to enter into agreements which provide effective collective bargaining procedures." (Carrington. nd: 4) This Bill was, however, seen in a different light by the NAACIE which viewed it as a means of outlawing strikes and successfully argued at the 1970 TUC Conference for its withdrawal (TUC Report 1970, NAACIE General Secretary Report 1969:4). With the opposition of the TUC to the Bill, the Government withdrew it and promised a full investigation into the laws governing workers' welfare. Five years later the government set up a broad based Labour Code Commission for this purpose (Ministry of Labour Report 1974. 37) although the recommendations were never implemented.

The workers continued the pressure on the employers and the MPCA. On March 19, 1974, almost the entire workforce of cane cutters with the exception of Diamond and Wales downed their tools to protest against the quantum allocated as profit sharing. This one day strike was endorsed by GAWU. Then on April 22, about 75 per cent of the field workers in the industry responded to a call by GAWU for a guaranteed 5 day working week; for casual workers with 3 years service to be placed on permanent roll and for double time for Sunday and Public holidays. More importantly, workers also made a set of national demands. They had heard that the Government had plans to institute legislation for the introduction of a levy on the export price of sugar, and on May 13 workers at Skeldon, Albion, LBI and Enmore Estates went on a two day protest strike against this impending legislation. They also let their concern be known about compulsory National Service which was being introduced in the country, and against the handing over of Community Centres to local authorities. Word of a strike for an interim relief in September reached the ears of the MPCA and having obtained the date, they issued an ultimatum to expire on the day of the strike call for September 21; seeking to appear able to mobilise the workforce. Irrespective of this the workers continued with their action and secured a 5 per cent interim relief pending the final outcome of the wages negotiations. The workers resumed work on September 30, 1974.

## A New Initiative

Conscious of what was taking place in the industry, the unrest of the workers, the increase in the cost of living and the division of the Unions, the NAACIE took the initiative to invite the other three unions, MPCA, GAWU and GHU to a conference on 27th October 1974 to explore the possibility of a closer collaboration with a view to effecting a merger among the unions. This they claimed was intended to "gather greater strength to meet the challenges facing sugar workers" (NAACIE General Secretary Report:1975:19) At the end of the meeting, the unions indicated by way of a joint press release that they had met:

and had full and frank discussion. It was agreed to have a closer co-operation in view of the economic plight facing sugar workers. It was also agreed that in future united actions will be taken to improve wages and other conditions and on other major issues aimed at improving the lot of sugar workers generally (ibid:20).

It was also proposed at the conference that a sub-committee comprising the Presidents and Secretaries of all the unions meet to draw up a declaration which would be sent to each union for approval. This was approved by all the unions with the exception of GAWU which asked for time to consider and to inform the next meeting, which was planned for November 2, 1974 (ibid). At that meeting the GAWU agreed to be present at a sub-committee meeting fixed for November 4. The MPCA and the GHU did not turn up for that meeting. Then they all agreed to meet ten days later, each promising to have a draft declaration for perusal of the other. Only NAACIE turned up with a draft, which suggested the setting up of a standing committee and secretariat to take action on issues agreed upon from time to time. This proposal was not agreed upon by the other unions, which promised to have their own draft ready for a meeting to be fixed. "Unfortunately, none of the other unions took any action on this matter and the work of the Committee ended in a stalemate" (ibid).

In the meantime the GAWU had submitted a ten point demand to the Minister and



had called an industry wide strike to enforce these demands. The demands included the payment of a minimum wage of \$11.68 per day, an increase in the cane cutting rate from \$2.98 to \$6.95 per ton, and the immediate release of the Haynes Arbitration Tribunal. This was a NAACIE dispute, but GAWU no doubt intended to indicate to NAACIE members that they were also fighting the NAACIE members' cause. They also demanded a 5 day work week and for casual workers to be given permanent employment after having worked three consecutive crops. Women workers should not be given more than 8 hours of work per day and there should be transportation from home to work areas. The union also requested that the strike days to be treated as 'not available days' for all workers, to enable them to qualify for fringe benefits.

Touching for the first time in a major way on the export levy, the GAWU demanded that it must be charged to an excess profits tax, which should be taken after the workers were given their 60 per cent profit sharing. Finally they demanded that recognition be granted to GAWU (Ministry of Labour Report, 1974:33). None of these demands were met nor was there any discussion on them during or immediately after the strike was called off.

Early in the first crop of 1975, the workers dissatisfaction became greater and their patience and tolerance gave way. They started a series of strikes on their own on a number of estates. NAACIE issued a statement on 22nd February, 1975:

pledging solidarity and full support for the struggles of the sugar workers. Having sensed the fighting spirit of the workers over the delays in settling their wage claims by the MPCA, the GAWU called a general strike in the industry as of 4th March 1975 (NAACIE General Secretary Report 1975:20).

They were seeking to enforce the ten point demands of Nov 1974. The SPA forced a breakdown at the talks with the MPCA and requested arbitration on the dispute. The MPCA, realising that it was bargaining under favourable conditions with the workers agitating, refused arbitration and insisted that the dispute should be resolved around the bargaining table. In the meantime, on the 7th of March 1975, the GAWU requested a meeting of the other three unions in the industry for March 10th, to discuss the industrial relations situation in the country. The GAWU representatives

informed that meeting that they had met the Minister twice since the strike was called, and he had notified them that he was satisfied that there were a number of injustices meted out to sugar workers and should the GAWU and MPCA put forward a joint proposal to alleviate the situation, he would take action by means of "orders of Council to correct the situation"( ibid).

The MPCA representatives then informed the meeting that the Minister had told them that should the union continue to oppose arbitration, the Government would enact legislation to introduce compulsory arbitration which would force the parties to resolve the issue at that level. Having heard those two reports, the unions established a sub-committee to prepare a joint memorandum to the Government. With the help of economist Clive Thomas of the University of Guyana, the document was ready within 5 days and dispatched to the Government. The unions also stated their objections to any compulsory arbitration legislation (3). Upon receipt of the document, Dr. P.A. Reid, Deputy Prime Minister, made a radio broadcast on the evening of March 15, 1975, that the Government would enact the legislation.

On 17th March Minister Carrington summoned a meeting of the unions in the industry and instead of addressing the issues raised in their memorandum, he informed the unions of the Government's intention to proceed with the legislation for compulsory arbitration. This was done on the same day that the Minister denied that he had made any promises to GAWU to act on any joint proposals by the rival unions. Apparently, he did not expect such a swift response. The united stand of the unions and the workers must have scared him and his Government.

Following the passage of the legislation, the Minister summoned the TUC to a meeting on March 19 to inform them of the strike situation in the industry and to seek their assistance in finding a solution. The TUC called a meeting of the Executive Council the same day and it was decided that the MPCA would be advised to appear in front of the Tribunal if the following demands were met:

- 1) That an interim relief of 10 per cent for 1974 and a further 10 per cent for

1975 based on the 1973 wage rates be paid.

2) That the SPA agree to implement out of crop guaranteed income for workers effective January 1, 1975.

3) That all strike days be regarded as not available days.

4) That the employers be compelled by law to make all books and accounts and records available to unions.

5) That the cost of the Tribunal be borne by the Government or the industry or both (TUC Minutes).

These demands were submitted to the Minister by the TUC at a meeting held on the following day. The Minister promised to raise all these issues with the appropriate bodies. The TUC had previously taken a decision not to have any dialogue with a union which was not affiliated to that body and was engaged in rivalry with an affiliated union. However, based on the "national interest", and on the insistence of NAACIE, the TUC entertained the GAWU representatives at two meetings of the Council which discussed the strike situation (4). This was yet another breakthrough for GAWU. The Prime Minister, who was acting as Minister of Labour for a short while, promptly intervened and referred the dispute to a hat trick of arbitration tribunals in March 1975, under s.4(1) (c) of the Labour Act. The Chancellor of the Judiciary, V.E. Crane, was appointed sole Arbitrator.

While the TUC was awaiting a response from the Ministry on their demands, the SPA tried to lure workers back on the job by issuing a circular informing them that if they were to return to work by April 1st, all the days that they were on strike would be treated as "not available". The workers did not respond to this attempt to undermine the strike. The substantive Minister then arranged a joint meeting between the TUC and the SPA under his chairmanship for April 3. The talks ended in a deadlock after the TUC demands were rejected by the SPA. The NAACIE reviewed the situation and issued a 72 hours ultimatum to the SPA on April 7, indicating that if the matter was not resolved NAACIE would, after the expiration of the ultimatum, take solidarity action with the striking workers (5). The MPCA had by that time broken ranks. They decided to appear in front of the Tribunal without any of the TUC demands agreed upon and the TUC withdrew from the talks. The management of the various estates sought to prevent NAACIE members from joining the strike to the extent that they

resorted to acts of intimidation. As a consequence, the LBI Branch came out on strike one day before the expiration of the strike notice. The following day, on April 10, the entire industry was crippled, as a result of NAACIE joining the strike. Even some factory workers who had not responded to the March 4 strike call by GAWU had joined the strike.

The Arbitration Tribunal held its first meeting on April 14, and the SPA offered \$3,000,000 as an interim relief. The MPCA accepted the offer but the workers were in no mood to listen to the MPCA. The TUC again rejoined the discussions following the NAACIE strike and again met with the SPA on 17th April:

The TUC had a more frustrating experience with the attitude and behaviour of the SPA. Some TUC executives expressed their unwillingness to meet the SPA again. This was good experience for some who thought that the union leaders were irresponsible in the sugar industry (6).

The Minister again met with the TUC, GAWU and NAACIE, along with the SPA on April 19, and this time there was a change in attitude of the SPA. The prevailing chaotic industrial relations situation forced the SPA to offer another \$4 million as an advance for 1974 and a 5 per cent increase on the rates from 1st January 1975 as an interim relief. "Though all the proposals had not been accepted by the SPA, the GAWU decided to call off the strike" (TUC General Secretary Report 1975:20). In the light of the GAWU decision, the NAACIE ended their solidarity action. The workers resumed work on April 21, 1975 "to be better prepared for the future struggles" (7).

The tribunal submitted an interim report in June 1975, which was followed by a comprehensive document two months later. The workers were awarded increased wages of 20 per cent for 1974 and a further 10 per cent for 1975, making the new minimum wage \$6.01 and \$6.61 respectively for the two years. The Arbitrator also awarded meal allowances to all workers in the MPCA categories to bring them in line with what was obtained by the NAACIE categories.

What was also significant was the award of compulsory 'out of crop earnings' to the sugar workers, based on a set of qualifying criteria. During the non-grinding or non-harvesting period workers were not guaranteed work, hence no payment was made to them. By this award the worker was to be given work to ensure that certain minimum sums were received or alternatively should be paid as if s/he worked. The male minimum weekly earnings was set at \$25.00 while the female was \$20.00, provided that the employees worked 90 per cent of the days available to them for the last three crops. They must be prepared to perform any type of work that could reasonably be expected of them and must present themselves daily or as required by the management at the 'order line' (place where workers normally meet to receive work instructions). Those workers who worked less than the 90 per cent but more than 75 per cent of the days available to them were given guaranteed weekly 'out of crop earnings' of \$20.00 and \$15.00 for men and women respectively. Guaranteed employment for the out of crop period had been a 'sore point' for the sugar workers. Their counterparts in Barbados and Trinidad had long obtained such benefits. This award, therefore, brought some measure of relief to them.

However, while increases along the lines of those awarded in Trinidad and Barbados were consistently sought by the MPCA but were never obtained, on this occasion the Arbitrator ruled against taking any consideration of wage increases paid to workers outside Guyana. He further ruled out any comparison with the mining and agricultural industry. Thus, he ruled out any possibility of increasing wages along the lines of bauxite workers. He also did not permit wage comparisons with manufacturing industries. "They are poles apart" (Crane Tribunal 1975: 17). While the Arbitrator agreed that there was a need to compare like with like to establish a reasonable basis for such comparison, he nonetheless ruled out a comparative analysis of wage movements and levels of sugar workers elsewhere outside of Guyana. He found the SPA's opposition to any such comparison to be more realistic:

I am rather inclined, however, to the Association's viewpoint that comparing levels of wages and remuneration between workers in different countries is a most difficult exercise and I fully share their conclusion that the destiny of the sugar industry in Guyana must be considered on its own merits and in the light of its own problems.... One cannot compare wage levels in West Indian

countries without taking full account of assessment of other factors such as net revenue, production costs, wage rates, the national economy, the cost of living, etc.,etc (ibid: 18).

### **Lessons from the Strike**

This strike had an important lesson for trade unionists. With united action the workers remained resolute. The employers were effectively pressured into making substantial payouts, even before the conclusion of the Tribunal. How is it they suddenly found money to pay? Why was this offer not made earlier, thus saving the industry and workers from such painful sacrifice? From what transpired and based on past experiences it was clear that the employers seldom make reasonable pay offers. They did so only when the workers were prepared to engage them in relentless struggles. Finally, if the workers were not strong, the vacillation of the leaders, especially those of the MPCA, could have had a demoralising effect on their struggles and demands. The wavering attitude of the MPCA in the seven week struggle of the workers invoked the wrath of the workers. The fact that they ended the strike in unity was a good sign for the fresh struggles about to be launched. The NAACIE severely criticised the MPCA and publicly called on the workers to disassociate themselves from that union (8).

The Crane Arbitration was the last negotiation conducted by the MPCA, which had demonstrated both its inadequacy and its culpability in not promptly presenting the wage claim for the 1974-1975 period. When Lowachee made his ruling for 1973 it had become apparent that there was enough time, at least seventeen months, for the negotiators to do preparatory work and to conduct negotiations with a view to concluding an agreement in time for the new application date of January 1, 1974. The procedure for beginning negotiations in accordance with the agreement, was for the union to submit its claim to the employers at least 90 days before the expiration of the agreement. The employer would then examine the union's demands and start negotiations. If the procedure was followed with dispatch, and goodwill prevailed on both sides, there was no reason why the parties could not arrive at an agreement on time. But the records showed that the MPCA was repeatedly guilty in submitting its

claim for improved conditions and wages for workers very late. In 1965, the MPCA submitted its claim some nine months late; for the 1969-70 negotiations the union was again four months late, and in the 1971-72 negotiations, its claim was submitted nine months late. In the last instance, there were twenty one meetings directly with the employers and a dozen at conciliation, before a deadlock was declared, and arbitration agreed (Lowachee 1972). There was no legislative means to settle disputes in a uniform way and protracted negotiations did not encourage a climate of harmonious industrial relations.

To the credit of the Ministry of Labour it summoned and held those twelve meetings within the space of three weeks from the date on which the request for conciliation had been made. This was in sharp contrast to the period of over one year in which direct negotiations took place. The problem was that workers had to wait over eighteen months after the expiration of a contract before a new one could be put in place. This invoked a climate of industrial instability. Further, it was turning the collective bargaining process into a vicious cycle of late negotiations. In 1974 the MPCA again waited for the agreement to expire by a month before making its demand on the sugar producers. This resulted in a four months loss in negotiating time - one month after the expiry date, plus three months prior to the expiry of the agreement. After failing to put a contract in place within six months of negotiations, the MPCA demanded interim relief and sought to enforce its position by calling on workers to take industrial action in September 1974. The parties, however, agreed that 5 per cent interim relief would be paid retrospectively to January 1, pending the conclusion of negotiations. The Ministry then intervened by trying to bring about a settlement, and held nineteen conciliatory meetings within six months (Crane 1975:7). But the workers and the GAWU would have none of what the representatives described as "pussy footing" and engaged in a spate of work stoppages for higher wages, which resulted in the SPA breaking away from conciliatory talks with the MPCA as we saw earlier. The SPA then requested the intervention of the Minister of Labour, asking it to refer the matter to either Arbitration, an Advisory Committee, or to a Commission of Enquiry (Ministry of Labour Report 1975). It was then that Crane was appointed.

## The Final Assault

Based on the Arbitration Award, the workers received their retroactive payments, less the interim payouts. The award gave them a tidy sum to put aside for a further mobilisation, which proved to be the final assault. The timing was ripe and the weather conditions superb for production when on October 21, 1975 the final assault for recognition was launched. The GAWU strike call crippled production. The Minister was showing signs of tiredness. As a trade unionist, he knew that the workers call had to be answered, but his masters' (PNC) approval had to be given. Part of the industry was already nationalized and word was already in the air that the Bookers Holdings would also be nationalized. Nothing came out officially from Government circles but all the whispers of 'anti-imperialist' and 'socialist' transformation of industry during that period had come to fruition.

With the workers solidly on strike for full recognition, the Government had to act. Either it joined forces with the SPA and the MPCA and engaged in an open confrontation with the workers with a view to breaking the strike or it allowed the recognition of GAWU. The Government agreed to settle the matter. The Minister of Labour then met with the SPA and MPCA and requested the SPA to serve notice on the MPCA to terminate the recognition agreement which would clear the way for GAWU to be recognised without a poll. But the SPA refused to act.

The Minister then gave GAWU an undertaking in writing that within two weeks from the date of full resumption, a poll would be held. Even then, the MPCA tried to delay the poll by stating their opposition to it and in fact indicated that they would not participate in a poll. However, the Minister went ahead and announced December 31, 1975 as the day of the poll. The GAWU secured 97.9% of the 21,955 workers who voted. The actual result is shown in the table below. After the results were made known, the MPCA agreed to have their recognition agreement with the SPA terminated, and GAWU entered into a recognition agreement with the SPA on 27th February 1976 which took effect from March 1, 1976. Speaking on the GAWU victory, the General Secretary of NAACIE, Bertis Bangaree said: "The GAWU ought



to be congratulated on its winning of recognition from the SPA and we hopefully look forward to the day when we could effect a merger with it; but in the meantime, we expect to enjoy fraternal working relations with the GAWU" (9). The workers were jubilant over the signing of the recognition pact. It was won from the planters, who had operated in the country, through a system of de facto slavery and misery, which had continued centuries of oppression in the industry.

It was the Chairman, Jock Campbell, who sought to correct some of the harsh conditions, who said: "workers are more important than ships and profits" (Shahabuddeen 1983:276). Workers in the industry were at long last given serious consideration.

**Table 4.2**  
**Poll Results**

		Per centage	
Total number of eligible voters	25,955	Eligible votes	Votes cast
Number of votes cast	21,955	84.59	-
Votes for GAWU	21,487	82.79	97.87
Votes for MPCA	376	1.45	1.71
Spoilt votes	92	0.35	0.42

The breakdown per estate is recorded in table 4.3:

Just months after the recognition pact had been concluded with GAWU, the entire Booker Empire in Guyana was nationalised on May 26, 1976 with the full support of organised labour and vast majority of the Guyanese people. Forbes Burnham, the arch rival of Cheddi Jagan, had, for the first time in his political career, almost an entire nation behind him over this single act. He asserted "how can a people, bent on owning and controlling their resources, pledged to revolutionising their economy and economic relations, live with a foreign based corporation which was responsible for

over 40 per cent of the country's exports and over 25 per cent of the gross domestic product and which, in addition, according to its own admission, brought no new capital into Guyana over the last ten years?"(Shahubbudeen 1987:276).

**Table 4.3**  
**Breakdown of Results**

Estates	Votes Cast	Spoilt	MPCA	GAWU
Skeldon	1520	6	26	1488
Albion	3381	13	41	327
Rose Hall	3014	9	51	2954
Blairmont	2320	8	40	2272
Enmore	2241	11	27	2203
LBI	2060	15	25	2020
Diamond	2128	15	79	2034
Wales	1548	6	23	1519
Versailles	695	2	25	668
Leonora	1027	3	17	1007
Uitvlugt	2021	4	22	1995
<b>Total</b>	<b>21955</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>376</b>	<b>21487</b>

**Sources: NAACIE General Secretary Report 1976**  
**Ministry of Labour Report 1975**

The TUC General Secretary, Joseph Pollydore, in welcoming the nationalisation, commented:

Over the years Annual Delegates Conferences of the TUC called for nationalisation of the sugar industry. NAACIE should be congratulated as the Union which initiated discussion on this matter at a TUC Delegates' Conference years ago and its persistent follow up motions for the TUC to call on the Government to expedite the nationalisation of the industry.

The acquisition of this giant concern, which operated in almost every sector of the economy, offers a challenge not only to Guyanese management and other workers who will run the several new sections into which the business has been divided, but it also offers a challenge to every Guyanese to contribute

towards ensuring the successful operations of the concern in keeping with the country's socialist objective to control and manage its resources. (TUC Report 1976:18).

But the nationalisation which was seen as the most definitive act of independence, soon became an act of giving more power to the ruling party. The euphoria surrounding the nationalisation was only for the moment.

The GAWU, having replaced the MPCA, showed that it could accomplish what was beyond the reach of the MPCA. Within months of gaining recognition, the GAWU was able to settle an agreement with the SPA for a 13 per cent increase in wages for 1976. It then took the bold step of endorsing the scales and increases agreed upon between the TUC and the Government for the 1977-79 period, much to the disappointment of NAACIE.

## **The Demise of the GFF&SU: The Foremen's Struggles 1976-1992**

One aftermath of the demise of the MPCA was that the NAACIE was in a position to make a serious bid to organise the Field Foremen. There were two previous efforts to organise these workers in the 1970's and yet again in the 1980s, involving an undertaking by the foremen to join NAACIE. They had signed a collective letter to the General Secretary, Mr Charran, to enter discussions with NAACIE in an effort to try to effect a merger. The requests by the workers were not entertained and they went on a campaign to rid themselves of the GFF&SU. A substantial number of them instructed the management of various estates to stop the deduction of union dues from their pay packets. That campaign was spearheaded by leading officers of the union. They had taken the side of their colleagues after the General Secretary failed to act on what they considered to be a reasonable request for a merger with NAACIE. The extent of the resignations on the various estates alarmed the management, who notified Mr Charran of what was taking place. The foremen had become completely

disgruntled. This position is confirmed by their former representatives whom I interviewed in 1994.

When they were asked if they were satisfied with the representation given to them by the GFF&SU, they unanimously claimed that the union was not interested in representing their cause with management. It failed to address many grievances including the dismissal of a number of their colleagues. They were of the view that all the union was interested in was their union dues. They also said that their previous General Secretary Mr Charran, now deceased, was a tool of management and collaborated with them to deny the workers their fair share for the job they were performing. Charran was also a loyal supporter of the former ruling party and because of his double loyalty, he was given adequate protection and allowed to coerce members into following his line. That was the reason why he did not listen to the Executive Members to effect a merger with NAACIE. His was a “one man union” (Interview: October 1994).

When they had enlisted over sixty per cent of the foremen into NAACIE in the 1980s, it was then that Charran showed his skills at openly siding with management. He made allegations against the acting President of the Union, Mangal Singh, who was working at the Diamond location, and the Treasurer, Monty Sukdeo, who was working at LBI. Both were disciplined by management and Sukdeo was forced to represent himself after he was suspended. The disciplinary measure against him was dropped when NAACIE members at LBI threatened to take solidarity action if the victimisation did not stop. Sukdeo was subsequently promoted outside the bargaining unit. While his promotion was justified, his departure from the ranks and the ever present threat of victimisation made the efforts to abandon the GFF&SU a difficult proposition.

The representatives cited two other instances where the former General Secretary collaborated with management to prevent the workers from having a union of their choice (ibid). The first was in 1977 at the Albion location and the other was in 1985 at the Enmore location. On both occasions they succeeded in getting almost all the

workers to rejoin the GFF&SU after the workers had resigned en masse (ibid). The attempts in the 1980s by NAACIE to organise the foremen were followed by discussion between the GAWU and NAACIE in which the GAWU had promised to relinquish representational rights for the charge hands and hand them over to NAACIE should it succeed in winning recognition for the field foremen. If that had been accomplished all the salaried workers would have been under the control of one union. The two unions, GAWU and NAACIE could have operated as a federation. But that did not materialise and the then GAWU General Secretary, Boysie Ramkarran, who was committed to the idea, retired shortly after the discussions (NAACIE Report 1983:29). Every time the matter was raised thereafter it was treated casually by the GAWU and rejected out of hand by the GFF&SU. As a result the NAACIE had, in 1986, taken a decision that the whole question of merger or unification of the unions had to come with pressure from local representatives at the various locations (NAACIE Report 1986: 39).

With the death of Charran in 1991, one of the officers was able to secure the services of the General Secretary of the UAAW, Selo Baichan, to become the advisor of the GFF&SU. It was previously explained that the UAAW was established in an attempt to further divide the sugar workers. The members were unhappy over this development. Both the GAWU and NAACIE were approached by the workers in this grouping, many of whom belonged to both unions prior to their appointment as foremen. The NAACIE acted with dispatch and applied for recognition to Guysuco, after its Branches had enlisted over fifty per cent of the foremen. Shortly afterwards the GAWU also applied for recognition. One official explained that the GAWU was not prepared to allow the entry of an ardent critic through the back door onto its turf. Hence, every attempt had to be made to stop Baichan before he consolidated his position in the industry.

Earlier, the GAWU experienced a degree of poaching in 1980 from the GWU. That union had approached several GAWU members and distributed forms to them with some success in the factory areas. This attempt by the GWU caused the GAWU to request the intervention of the TUC by letter of complaint dated May 14, 1980. It

was followed by another letter from the GAWU on July 2, which resulted in a meeting of the TUC on July 26, 1980. The meeting was aborted after the GWU failed to turn up for the meeting. The campaign was later discontinued (Ministry of Labour Report 1980: 16). This incident coupled with widespread dissatisfaction of sugar workers over the ending of the 1989 strike in which relations with NAACIE became sour, must have influenced the GAWU to try and further consolidate its position in the sugar industry.

Their entry into the race for recognition of the field foremen drew an immediate response from the management. Guysuco requested the Ministry of Labour to conduct a poll to determine which union has the majority support among that group of workers. The poll date was fixed for February 15, 1992. One company official explained that a three way contest by the unions was likely to result in the failure of any union to secure a clear-cut fifty per cent majority, which would result in the removal of trade union representation for this category of workers. The NAACIE had recognised this ploy on the part of the employer. Meanwhile, the NAACIE relations with GAWU were not anywhere close to the pre-1989 level but were gradually improving. The NAACIE decided to request a meeting with the GAWU on the matter.

During the course of the meetings the GAWU became conscious of the difficulties posed by a three corner fight, but was not prepared to back away. It indicated to NAACIE that it was going to take a chance at the polls. Continued discussions on the issue resulted in the withdrawal of NAACIE which enabled “the GAWU to come out with an easy victory” (NAACIE Report 1992 :49). The recognition of the GAWU for the field foremen and forewomen ended the existence of a union which was registered as the thirty sixth union in the country in 1946. “May its soul rot in hell” was how one union official summed up its departure. With the reductions of the unions in the industry as a result of NAACIE’s efforts, it would now be for the leaders of NAACIE and GAWU, being the remaining unions, to establish a serious working relationship as they sought to further improve the working conditions of all those who work in the mainstay of the Guyanese economy.

## Conclusion

Three themes have been addressed in this chapter, the continued rivalry among the unions, the demonstration of worker support for each union through strikes, and the settlement of wages through third party intervention. We see how the unions, GAWU and MPCA, sought to outdo each other by calling strikes on issues to which workers were likely to respond. The rivalry also created enormous problems for collective bargaining, in that the recognised union was unable to settle any wage package with the employers. One of the reasons for this failure was the mistrust of the MPCA which existed among the workforce. Even when the wage dispute was referred to arbitration or a commission of enquiry, that did not prevent the workers from taking strike action. The situation was therefore one in which procedures were not observed by workers, resulting in management's inability to maintain discipline and the lack of a stable industrial climate.

It is difficult to explain why, despite the severe disruptions to production and loss in revenue, the employers were adamant in their opposition to recognition of the GAWU. Their position seemed to be based on political considerations rather than a mere industrial rationale. The employers and the British government, prior to independence, collaborated for years to keep the GAWU out. In 1953 the extreme position was even taken to suspend the constitution and remove the PPP from office, in order to avoid the issue of the workers having a union of their choice. It was the closeness of the GAWU with the PPP, the ideological thinking of both organisations and the hegemonic control which the PPP sought at both the industrial and political level, which the multinational industry and the colonial masters feared most.

The intentions of the party and union were not disguised at all, since they even demonstrated their opposition to NAACIE mobilising the workers into one union, when the one-union position was supported by a wide cross section of the workforce. When the ruling party adopted an approach to the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy and got the support of the PPP it became clear that both the PNC and PPP came to the realisation that they needed each others support. It was at

that time that the decision was taken to have the dispute resolved. The SPA, even at that stage, refused to act on the advice of the Minister of Labour, who thus dictated the poll and forced the employers to act. The ease with which GAWU was able to make the three agreements established that, in times when the relationship of the two major parties, PPP and PNC, were not in a sour state, the industrial relations climate tended to be less disruptive. The stability was broken on the industrial front shortly after the breakdown of unity talks by the two parties in 1977. A long and bitter struggle ensued. This strike, with the further interweaving of industrial relations, state intervention and political alliances which it involved, is analysed in the next chapter.

### **Endnotes:**

1. The NPQ market came about as a result of the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement signed in 1951. It was intended to last up to December 31, 1972 and was executed by the Minister of Food on behalf of Her Majesty's Government in the UK and the Sugar Producers of Australia, the Union of South Africa, the British West Indies and Mauritius. Guyana was allocated a quota of 181,805 tons of sugar. Currently, Guyana has a guaranteed market with the EEC of about 182,000 tons at a negotiated price in July of each year. Guyana also sells sugar in the USA, Canada, and other Caricom countries.
2. This was disclosed after discussions with former senior officials of GAWU.
3. Notes of Meeting held among 4 sugar unions on March 10, 1975, and from NAACIE General Secretary Report 1975.
4. See Reports of TUC and NAACIE for 1975.
5. Taken from letter by NAACIE to the GSPA dated April 7, 1975.
6. Address by the General Secretary of NAACIE to its 29th Annual Delegates Conference, May 1975.
7. Ibid.
8. Press Release by NAACIE, dated 8th April 1975.
9. Address by the General Secretary of NAACIE to its 29th Annual Delegates Conference, May 1975.



# Chapter 5

## **The 1977 Anti Sugar Levy Strike: The unions, the state and political alliances**

In the last chapter it was mentioned that the workers on a few locations struck against the introduction of a sugar levy imposed by the government in 1974, and this issue became even more important in the ensuing years. This chapter investigates the way in which the sugar levy became a central issue in relations between the state, employers, sugar workers and their unions during the 1970s. In particular it traces the constraints which were built into a politicised process of centralised bargaining, the increasingly repressive character of state policy, the major problems which workers and unions then confronted, but also the efforts to build wider union unity and effectiveness in the face of these developments.

The Sugar Levy Act, No. 22 of 1974, was enacted in Parliament on July 6, 1974. This Act imposed a levy, at a graduated scale, on the price received for every ton of sugar exported. This decision was influenced by a very marked increase in the price of sugar in 1974, following an earlier decline on the world market. In that year, the price rose from about £140 per ton to £650 per ton for raw sugar on the international market.

The government's justification of the levy was based on its claim that its participation in the trade negotiations assisted the sugar companies in obtaining higher prices due to changes in market conditions. The companies on the other hand claimed that it was their efforts at the negotiations which brought about the change in the price obtained and pointed out that the levy was going to have disastrous effect on the industry.

Under the Act the company had to pay to the government tax on the following basis:- where the price received was in excess of \$365 up to \$521 per ton, a levy of 55 per

cent was applicable; where the price was in excess of \$521 up to \$625 per ton, a levy of 70 per cent was applicable; and where the price was in excess of \$625 per ton, a levy of 85 per cent was applicable (sec. 4.1).

The introduction of this law drew wide condemnation from one of the major unions in the industry, the NAACIE. In addition, the tribunal looking into salaries and working conditions of workers during that period called on the government to grant as a temporary measure some "form of reduction of the rates charged on the levy in the event of higher prices for sugar not obtained on the world market..."(Crane 1975:36). The opposition PPP also called on the government to introduce an Excess Profits Tax on the industry instead of the levy. However, at meetings with representatives of unions, the government argued that the companies could conceal total profit but not total production, hence the application of the levy in that form.

The GAWU at that time was not recognised by the sugar producers. However, it raised some objections to the levy by linking it to a general strike called to enforce recognition. In a ten point demand the levy and profit sharing was highlighted in item 8, which stated that "the export levy must be charged to an excess profits tax, which should be taken after workers were given their 60 percent profit sharing"(Min of Labour Report 1974:33). The matter was not vigorously pursued by the GAWU but remained a sore point for sugar workers, especially since the employers declared a meagre \$7.9 m dollars as profit sharing for 1974, in what was considered the best year of the industry.

After the GAWU was recognised in 1976 it had exercised considerable restraint and showed goodwill by signing three collective agreements with the sugar companies for that year without having to resort to industrial action, commission of enquiry or arbitration. This process was a regular feature in the industry prior to the recognition of GAWU, as was seen in the previous chapter. The agreements signed included one for recognition and the avoidance and settlement of disputes, a wage pact and a resolution of the thorny issue of annual production bonus (GAWU/ Guysuco Agreements).

This union had, therefore, established an exceptionally good relationship with both the former owners and the newly nationalised entity. The year before, the GAWU had also worked out a formula with the other unions in the industry, the GHU, the NAACIE and its arch enemy the MPCA, on how the levy for 1974 should be allocated. They recommended as follows :

- (1) 50 per cent of the levy should apply to increasing wages to sugar workers to the level of \$91.08 per week.
- (2) 25 per cent of the levy should apply to other workers in the country whose wages were below the \$91.08 per week to bring their wages up to that level;
- (3) that 12.5 per cent should be put into the price stabilisation fund from which money could be drawn to maintain these levels of wages if and when sugar prices fell too low and the remaining 12.5 per cent should be placed in the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Fund to speed up housing of sugar workers(1).

The amount the government collected in levy for 1974 was \$130.4m, for 1975 it collected \$225m and for 1976 \$66m with substantially higher sums in later years. With the extraction of this amount by government from the industry the workers were denied about sixty percent of the total sum collected as profit sharing based on previous arbitration awards. Therefore, the amount which was proposed by the unions as an allocation to workers was less than what they were entitled to under existing conditions of service. The government did not listen to the complaints of the sugar workers, nor did it heed the proposal put forward by the sugar unions. The GAWU then sought and obtained the support of the TUC in its 1976 September congress which among other things:

resolved that this 23rd Annual Delegates Conference of the Guyana Trades Union Congress calls on the government of Guyana to adjust the sugar export levy, and to establish a new basis for computing profit sharing based on the pre levy level of profit (2).

As on all the other major issues confronting labour, the TUC did very little over the next year to find a solution to the vexed question of the levy. The Honorary President of the GAWU, Dr C.B.Jagan, who was also the Leader of the opposition PPP, was active in representing the issue with Prime Minister Burnham. During this period, the

PPP was in close dialogue with the ruling PNC party and Dr. Jagan personally told the:

...comrade Prime Minister that profit sharing was owed to the sugar workers by the former owners for 1974. As a result, the Crane Tribunal was established to investigate the issue and to adjudicate GAWU's claim. GAWU was represented at the first formal session of the tribunal held on the 20th July 1976 by its President, Comrade Ramkarran, its General Secretary, Comrade Maccie Hamid, and four of its other members. The arbitrator, in accordance with the legal procedures of the tribunal requested GAWU to submit a memorandum in setting out its case and this the union undertook to do by September 1976. (3)

The GAWU did not continue the representation at that level and apparently did not indicate to the tribunal its reasons for not doing so. While representation continued for profit sharing between the union and employer, there were also serious discussions taking place at the political level between the PPP and PNC. The PPP had initiated talks with the PNC for the creation of a national front government. This was a changed policy of the party:

In August 1975 we changed our political line from non cooperation and civil resistance to critical support... with the possibility ...to a political solution....Our party's decision to take part in the May Day celebrations together with Prime Minister LFS Burnham, and our decision to re-enter Parliament no doubt strengthen the resolve (of the government) to go ahead with the nationalisation (of the sugar industry).At the same time, the ensuing unity of the working class frustrated the plans if any, of the imperialists to attack our country (PPP 1977: 29, 30.)

Although the PNC was an unrepresentative and undemocratic government and had not been addressing workers' issues seriously, the PPP, in the light of it's declaration of a socialist path of development and the nationalisation of some major business entities, felt that it must give its support to the PNC. While the talks were going on it appeared that the PPP conceptualised that it would not be prudent for any pressure to be put on the government in 1975 and 1976 in the form of strike action over the levy. According to the PPP:

what is now required is a political solution based on the creation of a National Patriotic Front Government including all parties and groups which are progressive, anti imperialist and wish to see Guyana take a socialist oriented or non capitalist path of development.... It will exclude all reactionary, pro-imperialist, racialist parties or groups (ibid).

This initiative was intended to push the PNC along the socialist path and at the same time blunt any attempt by the "reactionary, bureaucratic bourgeois and petty bourgeois classes (which) are exerting their efforts to keep Guyana on a capitalist path"(ibid: introduction). Prior to the launching of the national patriotic front proposal on August 9, 1977, the PPP and the PNC were engaged in "unity talks" but these talks collapsed in December 1976, over an editorial in the PPP's newspaper, the MIRROR on November 28, 1976 captioned " Guns Instead of Bread". The article attacked the government over its withdrawal of subsidies on essential food items and increased spending on the armed forces. The PNC leader was furious over the article and called on the PPP for a retraction of the editorial (ibid.). The PPP refused and the talks collapsed. The PPP's concept of unity in struggle seemed not to find favour with Burnham.

The second initiative launched by the PPP after months of consultation with their members and their central committee, was through a press conference on August 9. This was no doubt intended to capture the attention of PNC delegates who were preparing for their second Biennial conference which was held from August 12-20 1977. The PPP's position was heavily criticised by some sections of the population, especially the Indian middle class who saw it as a sell out and total submission to a dictator. But the PPP was unmoved, it argued its position from an ideological standpoint and cited cases where internal divisions in countries pursuing socialism created fertile grounds for military take overs which resulted in the setting up of right wing dictators:

Experience has shown in the Dominican Republic at the time of the popularly elected Bosch government that imperialism will resort to force when the left is permitted democratic freedoms and is growing. In Chile, the imperialists and the reactionaries resorted to the military solution after they saw ...Salvador Allende, despite all intrigues against it, had increased its electoral strength

from 36 per cent... in the 1970... to 43 percent... in April 1973... In Argentina, for instance, after the death of Juan Peron, his wife Isabella Peron took over as President and moved to the Right. In the ensuing fierce struggle between the left and the right inside and outside the Peronist movement, the army moved in to 'save the nation' and set up a rightist dictator... Imperialists would also prefer an outright rightist military dictatorship because it does not completely trust the PNC ... One thing that our proposal has clearly demonstrated to the peoples who are the ones who are really concerned about solving the mounting social and economic crisis (PPP 1977: 26-30,2).

The major and influential political party outside these two at that time, the WPA, known for its Marxist views and strong anti PNC position, had this to say about the PPP's proposal:

The WPA does not go along with the details of the PPP's proposals for a national patriotic front but it welcomes the patriotic spirit behind the proposals. Only a patriotic party will offer such a formula to a minority party in a time of crisis (4).

The TUC also agreed that:

anti imperialist unity is necessary if Guyana is to succeed in the declared objective of pursuing a path leading to socialist development of the country...and...the polarisation of the vast majority of the people along racial and political line is an obstacle to such development...(5)

One would expect that a ruling party which is desirous of pursuing socialist development would grasp at an offer of unity, especially since it has had the acceptance of some of the main political and trade union organisations in the country. However, the PPP and those who thought this a possibility soon received a rude awakening. The PNC leader, half way through his congress, flatly rejected the PPP's proposal and in his usual arrogant manner indicated that it was the duty of the PNC "to achieve unity in the socialist sense" and a coalition between leaders is merely superficially attractive..."if the Bolsheviks had sought unity with the Mensheviks on coalition terms the history of the Soviet Union would have been differently written" (6). Additionally the PNC congress came up with striking anti-labour positions, aimed at Union busting and strike breaking tactics. It recommended:

that an Industrial Court be set up by government to revise the labour laws governing workers and that penalties be devised for dealing with industrial malpractice, particularly those perpetuated by trade unions. In this context ...government should authorise the formation of another union in the sugar industry as a means of allowing sugar workers the opportunity of benefiting from a trade union along socialist lines ... and (a) for a regionalised structure of this industry so that the implementation of the party's policies might be guaranteed;(b) for the formation by party's comrades of an Agricultural Workers Cooperatives Society which contract labour as a means of combatting the strike situation (PPP 1977:4).

The PNC was apparently not interested in unity or the stated objectives of its conference theme "Economic Liberation Through Socialism". Having 'rigged' the 1973 elections and giving itself a two thirds majority in Parliament (a position verified by a British Parliamentary Human Rights Group headed by Lord Avebury and other Human Rights Organisations) it believed that it could rule the country without the PPP or any other group for that matter. It was also clear that the PNC had informants planted within the PPP and GAWU, because their congress had put a plan in place in anticipation of what would happen in the sugar industry. This suggests that the ruling party believed that this industry was the main area that they had to neutralise, since this industry was the power base of the PPP.

The rejection, therefore, of the PPP's proposal by the PNC caused the PPP to become very agitated and it urged "the Guyanese people to fight for a political solution as the only way to solve the crisis and avert the danger facing the nation"(ibid:2). Within a week of the PNC's response, the GAWU served notice on the sugar industry to take industrial action over the non payment of profit sharing for 1974. The strike started following the expiry of a seventy two hour deadline timed from the receipt of the notice. The TUC requested the GAWU to hold its hand so as to allow that body to explore the possibility of breaking the deadlock on the levy and profit sharing. GAWU was unmoved since the issue had been in the lap of the TUC for nearly a year.

A crippling strike ensued in the sugar industry, beginning on August 23, 1977. The government immediately dubbed the strike political and in a show of force resorted to

anti- working class measures. Over six thousand scabs were recruited on a permanent basis, and public servants, the army, para- military and prisoners were redirected to the cane fields. The government also resorted to repressive measures and scores of union representatives were arrested and charged by the police for strike related offences. Within a week of the general strike, Parliament was summoned, the standing orders suspended, and two pieces of repressive legislation approved. The Summary Jurisdiction (Appeals Amendment) Bill was introduced, ostensibly to prevent hardened criminals, upon conviction, from abusing the appeal system in a way which allowed them to stay out of prison pending the hearing and determination of the appeal. The aim, however, was to target leaders of striking workers for unduly long detention . Part 2 of the National Security Act was also reactivated. This legislation allowed the Government, as was feared, to detain strike activists without trial, restrict the movement of individuals and institute curfews.

Both pieces of legislation were hurried through all their stages in Parliament on September 1,1977, without the opposition members of parliament having any chance to study them. The Guyana Human Rights Association (GHRA), the Guyana Bar Association (GBA) and the major opposition parties were not impressed that the first mentioned legislation had anything to do with hardened criminals. Its timing and police action spoke volumes. Within two weeks of the strike over "100 activists of GAWU have been arrested on flimsy excuses. Most have been charged for intimidation"(ibid: 6) The government at that time had tremendous influence over the Courts especially the Magistracy, where many magistrates were often referred to as "cow boys" by the ordinary man in the street, and they were heavily under the control of the ruling party. This was evidenced in the lack of reasoning in decisions given in a number of cases which have been decided against anti- government protestors. The intention was, therefore, to scare unionists and workers away from demonstrations and other peaceful activities permitted in any civilized society. There was the clear signal that, once charged, the activists could spend years in prison. So strong was the influence of the ruling party on the Courts that it had its flag hoisted in front of the Court of Appeal Building and it took mounting pressures from human rights and other groups to have it removed. The Court was not the only institution used to put pressure



on striking workers.

The police continually targeted vehicles transporting foodstuff intended to be distributed as strike relief, resulting in tons of foodstuff being confiscated. Motor vehicles used for strike activities were impounded, including a car which was used by the leader of the opposition in the New Amsterdam area, on suspicion of it having stolen parts (PPP 1977:7). The government went on an open campaign against the PPP and GAWU and accused them of having something to do with fires which occurred at two government rice mills and at Demerara Timbers Ltd. complex. It was clear from the very beginning that the government was not interested in settling the dispute with the GAWU. Instead, it was bent on using strike breaking techniques to crush the workers' struggles regardless of the cost and the consequences for the sugar industry. The government strategy to deal with GAWU and other militant unions was hatched at the ruling party's congress in August. PNC supporters who were mobilised to cut canes in the fields ended up collecting free cutlasses, files and water bags at great cost to the industry without ever reaching the back-lands. Others who went into the fields found the job too daunting and never went back after a day or two, or escaped without ever returning their tools (7). The recruitment exercise continued unabated. It was in short, the mobilisation of the state apparatus against the striking sugar workers. The leadership of GAWU was not prepared for a long struggle and in fact indicated very early that they would like to ensure that a suitable machinery be set up to properly investigate the issue. But the government was uncompromising and set out "to teach the GAWU a lesson"(8).

A fight of this kind by any union would be a difficult task, since the PNC had almost total control, through coercion, of the entire state sector, the military and para-military. During that same period, sociologist Ken Dadds indicated, on the basis of research, that one out of every thirty Guyanese was a member of the disciplined (military and para - military) service. Additionally, the consolidation of state power was rapid and decisive in that:

bureaucratization has accompanied state penetration into the economy and the

increasing necessity of the ruling political elite to regulate on its behalf all life in civil society (Thomas 1987:178).

The control and muzzling of the mass media, coupled with the denial of any rights of union officials to hold public meetings to explain their position on the strike, allowed only for the government propaganda against the striking workers and their Union. Fortunately, the Guyanese public by then had become accustomed to the repressive nature of the regime, both in using and seeking to justify the use of its militia men to break strikes which had been legitimately called by workers.

### **Previous Attacks On Workers**

These developments cannot be understood in isolation. They must be seen in the context of a longer history of repressive actions, and also in relation to the longer-term political incorporation of many trade unions. During the 1970s several unions complained to the TUC about the unnecessary use of PNC thugs and military personnel at strike scenes. The repressive intent of the regime was exposed in 1970 when a draft Trades Disputes Bill aimed at making strikes illegal was circulated to the TUC for comment. Pressure by NAACIE forced the TUC to reject the Bill with caustic criticism coming from General Secretary, J.H.Pollydore:

No democratic government with genuine socialist objectives would consciously enact laws that would abolish or even abridge an important fundamental right - such as the right to strike. The government itself by now must be convinced of the utter futility of enforcing anti-strike laws as a means of improving industrial relations or increasing productivity (TUC Report 1971:14).

The union official had also argued that many countries with anti-strike laws have found it impossible to enforce them effectively. Workers at times defy the law, and the imprisonment and violence which have been associated with the enforcement of such laws have ended with workers strengthening their resolve and in "some cases impel[ed] them into forging new political alignments" (ibid). The criticisms were so widespread that the government decided to shelve the Bill. However, the ruling PNC

party did not stop their attacks on striking workers.

During a one week general strike in the Bauxite industry in April 1971, the use of the security forces was very evident and threats and intimidation were prevalent, resulting in twenty three workers charged for offences allegedly connected with the strike. The intervention of the TUC resulted in these workers being released from custody on bail. These and other actions by the police and military personnel resulted in a meeting with the Prime Minister:

over the use of troops as strike breakers, and the presence of armed police at the locus of strikes. A number of affiliates reported that almost immediately strikes involving their members began, armed police besieged the strike locations. In other instances troops took up strategic positions, while others loaded vessels with cargo (ibid).

The TUC was not forceful in its demand that the army should not be used as strike breakers and the meeting merely confirmed the position of the government that it would continue to use the military in trade disputes. This the TUC considered as "satisfactory assurances regarding the manner of determining those exigencies which may demand the use of troops during industrial disputes...(and)...the deployment of armed police at strike locations" (ibid). The accommodating manner in which negotiations had been conducted between the Government and the TUC on matters affecting organised labour allowed for repressive behaviour by the government against workers. The situation at strike scenes had not improved and complaints continued to be sent to the TUC.

On May Day 1972 the traditional role of the police, in simply controlling traffic at rallies in a relatively orderly way, was broken when workers were tear gassed at Good Hope, on the East Coast of Demerara, while on their way to attend a parade organised by the GAWU. In other areas workers belonging to the same union were arrested and charged by the police for their involvement in marches and meetings (TUC Report 1972: 19). Despite all the repressive activities by the government against workers, the Executive Council of the TUC endorsed the PNC at the elections in July 1973, and

their leaders, Messers. Pollydore, Blair, Todd, Ishmeal and Cambridge along with Vivienne Surrey participated in meetings urging the Guyanese electorate to support the PNC at the elections. These leaders may have been able to justify their endorsement of the PNC at elections in 1964 and 1968 to some of their members, but based on the repressive nature of the PNC before the 1973 elections, the union leaders should have been more circumspect.

During the election, the massive 'rigging', including the seizure of ballot boxes by the army and the terror which it had unleashed against the Guyanese public, resulting in two deaths and the arrests of several others (PPP 1978), were not condemned by the TUC. Instead it applauded the results and pointed out that "the return of the PNC Government at the July elections with the overwhelming majority it has achieved gives real hope that during the next five years Guyana should witness continued progress"(TUC Report 1973:19) Yet, further on the TUC admitted that the "worsening unemployment situation" was a source of concern (ibid). The TUC's action was seen as an endorsement of the oppression which had been exerted by the government against a people.

It was not only sugar workers who had come under attack, but every major section of the working class. The bauxite workers, however, were the ones who received the worst treatment by this regime in as much it is claimed that the bauxite community was the strongest base for the PNC. The workers were not led by the union officials who caused their union, the GMWU, to be affiliated to the PNC. They were led by a militant group of shop stewards and it was this group that came in for special treatment. In the midst of a strike in the bauxite industry in December 1976 forty of the shop stewards were arrested and tear gassed while they were in the prison cells. The strikers were threatened with dismissal and soldiers and police were mobilised to perform their duties (NAACIE Reports, 1977/ 1980). It was also the period in which a leading academic, Walter Rodney, was denied the right to be employed at the University of Guyana. The PNC controlled University Board vetoed the decision of the Academic Board, which had supported the application of Rodney to be employed at the University (ibid).

These despotic actions had taken place during an era when the PNC had transformed itself from a “cooperative socialist party to a Marxist- Leninist party” (TUC Report. 1975) to coincide with the philosophy of the major party at that time, the PPP. Trade Union affiliation to the ruling party was also accelerated and among the unions which affiliated were the GLU, Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU), Guyana Teachers Union (GTU), Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU), Guyana Postal and Telecommunication Workers Union (GPTWU), Guyana Mine workers Union (GMWU), GWU, UAAW and a few paper unions. The 1975 Congress of the ruling party endorsed the following recommendations of one of its workshops on the role of labour:

1. During this period, Unions should make funds available annually for education of workers in programmes approved by the state.
2. Punitive measures should be meted out to party members who support trade unions whose aims and objectives are not consistent with the revolutionary movement.
3. Salaried unionists should be phased out because this encourages such leaders in supporting any unjust demands by the workers .
4. Trade Unions operating in the public sector must be affiliated to the party, since unions not affiliated can undermine the aims and objectives of the party and government.
5. An industrial relations Bill should be introduced through unions affiliated to the party and the party should establish a system to determine the necessity for strike action.
6. It is incumbent on all party members to ensure that the trade unions are affiliated to the party.
7. Non affiliated unions whose members belong to the party should, through the executive of that union, urge affiliation (TUC Report 1975: Introduction).

The Prime Minister was emphatic. His was the paramount party and the public sector had to pledge allegiance to the party. The heads of all state agencies and the civil service were summoned at short notice to attend any event of the ruling party, including General Council meetings. He claimed that:

a massive campaign has now been launched in which there can be no place for the disinterested and non- conformist who envisages freedom in terms of indulging in the practices and attitudes which were part of the colonial order. We did not win political freedom from colonialism to protect the freedom of colonialism to poison and mislead our society and divert us from our national goals (Burnham 1974:26).

For Burnham, strikes and other forms of industrial action had their roots in colonialism and ought not take place in his republic. The PNC was therefore ready to do battle with all those who sought to question the government, irrespective of race. Black workers and academics who opposed the regime were ruthlessly attacked. The efforts made by the regime to break the sugar strike in 1977 following the breakdown of the unity talks must therefore not be seen in isolation. An important implication of these developments was that the claim, made by some politicians, that the PNC should be seen as a racist party, could no longer be sustained, since it showed that all those who challenged the administration came in for 'special treatment'.

### **Attempts At Settling The Strike**

The propaganda waged against GAWU and the striking workers only impressed the rapidly declining party supporters. With the early mobilisation of the entire state machinery and the harassment of hundreds of GAWU supporters it was evident to the workers' leaders that a tactical retreat had to be undertaken, since it was unlikely that there would have been a satisfactory outcome. The issue of the strike was therefore taken to the level of the TUC within four weeks of its commencement. The NAACIE initiated a meeting with the unions operating in the sugar industry as well as the UGWU and CCWU to discuss the strike situation, following which a letter was dispatched to the TUC which criticised that body for remaining silent while repressive activities were conducted by the government against striking workers. The five Unions, CCWU, UGWU, GHU, MPCA and NAACIE, urged the TUC to:

abandon its hopelessly negative attitude and take action to have the strike ended on the basis of a just settlement of the sugar workers' grievances... (which) have all been properly laid before the TUC (9).

The GAWU also notified the TUC then that it was prepared to call off the strike on reasonable terms to be negotiated by the TUC. Since the conference of the TUC was about to be held, the matter was given top priority and in his presidential address, Basil Blair boasted that:

there will be no strike in the current period that the TUC when given the task , will fail to settle in the interest of the workers. The strike in the sugar industry will be no exception (10).

Immediately after the opening session of the TUC congress the matter came up for discussion. A committee of eleven, headed by Ashton Chase, was appointed and included two staunch PNC supporters, former Labour Minister Carrington and K. Denny, along with Jagan and Ram Karran of GAWU, to study the circumstances of the strike and present proposals for its resolution. The Committee submitted a unanimous Report, which called on the TUC to take prompt action to negotiate a settlement of the dispute using as a guide the traditional terms of resumption, which included 'no victimisation, no break in service, workers on the payroll prior to the strike shall resume their normal duties and the strike days to be treated as "not available days"'. The TUC should also ensure that "all those persons who were deployed or recruited during the strike shall be reverted to their original posts or their services terminated" (11) The Committee further recommended that the congress should agree to the simultaneous adoption of the following motion:

Whereas a motion was passed at the last conference giving the TUC the authority to pursue representations with the government on the question of the sugar levy and profit sharing;

Resolved that this 24th Annual Delegates Conference recommends to the GAWU to call off the strike on the basis that generally accepted terms of resumption agreed upon including an interim payment; and that the TUC, in concurrence with the GAWU pursue expeditious representations with the Government on the issues involved in the strike, in view of the decision taken at the last conference, with a view to settling the matter within two weeks from the date of resumption of work (12).

The delegates overwhelmingly approved the report of the Chase committee and the TUC made contact with the government to discuss the issue. A meeting was fixed for the next day, September 25, between Guysuco and the TUC. However, what seemed to have been a very simple issue for the TUC to settle became protracted, with Guysuco and Government taking up an adamant approach to the proposals of the TUC. The main area of difference between the TUC and Guysuco was the removal of the 6,132 scabs, which the industry employed on a permanent basis and called "new recruits". By October 6, after six meetings, the parties were unable to reach an accord

on the scabbing dispute (NAACIE Records).

Since this was the issue which the unions identified as a serious bone of contention, it was decided by both parties that the Ministry of Labour be requested to set up conciliatory mechanisms with a view to arriving at a settlement. A very prompt meeting took place between the Minister of Labour and the TUC on October 8, and after hearing the case put forward by the labour leaders the Minister promised to meet with Guysuco and then the TUC. It took eleven days for the Minister to inform the TUC that Guysuco was not prepared to withdraw the scabs. Simultaneously, he cancelled another meeting fixed for the next day, October 20, and soon thereafter dubbed the strike as politically motivated (ibid).

The Minister of Labour indicated that the GAWU did not follow the procedures laid down in the collective agreement for the avoidance and settlement of disputes and therefore it would be wrong for him to chair a meeting between the TUC and Guysuco when there was no industrial basis for the strike. By serving notice to call the strike and then carrying through the action, the GAWU violated the aforementioned agreement, hence acceptable industrial relations principles could not be used as a basis for settling the dispute. The Minister asserted:

There is no question that GUYSUCO is and has always been willing to negotiate with GAWU any claim the union may feel it is justified in making on the subject of profit-sharing during the period 26th May 1976 to 31st December 1976 ...and for the period 1975 and up to May 25, 1976 must be made against the former owners of the sugar industry (13).

He urged the TUC to advise the GAWU to end the strike without any terms of resumption and indicated that there will be work for everyone in the industry, including those who were recruited since the strike started. The strike, the Minister emphasised:

is regarded by my Ministry as a political action taken in the name of a trade union under the direction of the opposition Peoples Progressive Party... you realise that GAWU/PPP efforts seek to cut the supply of oil and, by other



representations, to prevent the unloading of shipments of sugar in the United Kingdom, both efforts designed to cripple the economy and endanger the jobs of thousands of workers particularly in the bauxite and other industries(14).

The TUC and the sugar unions were unimpressed by the Minister's response. The TUC took the position that the continuation of the strike was as a result of the failure by Guysuco to remove the scabs. As a consequence, the TUC could not advise the GAWU to call off any strike without an agreement to such a fundamental issue. Further, since September 25, the GAWU agreed to the TUC's position that the strike should be ended once an agreement had been arrived at between the TUC and Guysuco and in this regard the TUC had shown flexibility while the employer and the Government had been intransigent on the issue of scabbing. Moreover, there were several cases where strikes have been labelled political in order to evade the real issues. Under a PPP government, the 1963 political strike against the Labour Relations Bill ended after an agreement had been arrived at with the government for the removal of scabs. In the transitional stage from capitalism to socialism the TUC averred that:

the workers never anticipated that they would witness...a nationalised industry would be in a much stronger position than the industry had been under capitalist ownership, to show resistance to the acceptance of traditional terms of resumption and be allowed to remain steadfast...while the country's economy suffers seriously (15).

It was the TUC's position also that the situation in Guysuco would heighten the feeling among workers that the pattern of industrial relations in nationalised industries would continue to remain in the antagonistic manner as it was under the capitalist owners. Such a situation would lead to:

frustration, lack of commitment and indifference on the part of workers stemming from the fear that if they go on strike, strikebreakers would be recruited and offered permanent employment. Such development would adversely affect the general economy of the country (16).

Following the TUC's letter, Bertis Bangaree, General Secretary of NAACIE, took issue with the position of the Minister. He pointed out that profit sharing is a negotiable matter between union and management, hence a strike on such an issue was industrial. There were instances where the employer violated collective agreements and those actions have never been dubbed political. Bangaree also mentioned that even the former owners complained that the levy was making it difficult for the industry and Guysuco equally urged a modification of it, resulting in the remission of \$31m of the \$58.6m payable under the Act for the year 1976. As to the criticism that GAWU did not follow the procedure, Bangaree mentioned that early in the spring crop of 1977 the union had served an ultimatum on Guysuco and at the request of the TUC the strike action was deferred, but nothing was done to bring the issue close to a resolution. As a consequence, the strike was called after months of foot dragging. Therefore, the allegations that the strike was political were misplaced:

The strike you say is political. This is disputed. But assuming it is political -it is not illegal. In our view therefore, you cannot abdicate your responsibility to work for an honourable resolution of the impasse.... In all the previous political strikes the accepted normal resumption terms were subscribed to. This is the first such occasion in which the retention of scabs is being insisted on - and alas, with a tenacity that seems to know no bounds (17).

The NAACIE had also placed its members on a state of alert to take solidarity strike action if the issue was not resolved. Its executive council meeting of October 16, 1977 made a substantial donation of \$50,000. to the strike fund of the GAWU. When it was clear to NAACIE that the Government was adopting a dilatory attitude on the scab issue, the union called out its entire membership on strike as from November 21st, for two weeks. But the solidarity action did very little to change the position of the government. Several international trade union organisations wrote to the government to express outrage at its action in retaining the scabs. Among them was the Oilfields Workers Trade Union of Trinidad, which indicated that so long as the issue remained unresolved the embargo placed on oil destined to Guyana from Trinidad would continue. Two shop stewards from Tate and Lyle refinery in UK, Terry Hardy and John Wheatley, visited Guyana and informed the Guyanese public on their effective

blockade of Guyana's sugar at ports in the UK in solidarity with the striking sugar workers. Their presence in Guyana forced an admission from the government, which had previously denied press reports that ships with sugar from Guyana were held in UK ports without being discharged (Minister's Letter to TUC, 27th October 1977).

The Caribbean Council of Churches, at a meeting in Georgetown, endorsed two resolutions calling on the government to listen to the representation of the TUC and withdraw the scabs with a view to bringing the issue to an end. They also made a financial contribution to the strike fund inclusive of the amount raised from individual delegates to the conference (18).

Despite international pressure and severe damage to the national economy the government held firmly to its position. The Minister of Labour met the TUC twice after the TUC and NAACIE appeal, on November 11th and 16th. Based on the lack of urgency in convening meetings to discuss the scab issue, the government had displayed a callous approach in handling an industrial relations dispute and showed its intent of forcing the workers into submission. Surely if the government had any intention of resolving the issue it would have acted in a more positive manner, rather than convening a mere six meetings in 102 days, ie. from September 26 to January 5, 1978. While dilatory tactics were used by the government, the state media went on the offensive against the workers and their union, by accusing union leaders of seeking to destabilise the government and encouraging acts of sabotage in the country. The TUC did not have the courage to publicly state their position on the strike or the scab issue despite the fact that their position was often misrepresented by the Government. They had also refused to allow the GAWU to use the weekly "Voice of labour programme" allocated to the TUC by the state radio, to discuss the strike issue.

Having displayed the TUC's lack of courage and inability, for yet another time, to force the government into treating organised labour with respect, the sugar workers had indeed been forced to retreat after being on strike for 135 days - from August 23rd 1977 to January 5th 1978. The workers' funds had been depleted, and several of

their leaders arrested and charged with strike related offences. A senior manager employed at the Blairmont factory, Mahazrudeen, was dismissed for his refusal to carry out orders outside his job description - to be engaged in strike breaking activities. He later won his case in the Courts based on representation by Ashton Chase (NAACIE Report 1980).

The will to struggle on was visible among many of the strikers but, as some of their representatives later claimed, they had to contend with the full force of the state apparatus with very little support from other sections of the workforce (Interview: October, 1994). In addition, they indicated that the union was not prepared for a long struggle and at the initial stage did not anticipate such a vicious response from the government. The leaders vowed that the battle against the levy would continue and that workers who were entitled to profit sharing would have to be paid their fair share. They were therefore "adjourning" the strike (19).

Following the end of the strike three unions, the CCWU, NAACIE, and UGWU, severely criticized the TUC for its failure to give militant support to the strikers and for its silence on the number of violations which have been perpetuated by the government during the strike. The unions attacked the TUC for its refusal to call a twenty four hours' protest strike based on a joint request from the GAWU and NAACIE, and for abdicating its responsibilities in carrying out "the letter and spirit of the instructions given to it by the 24th Annual Conference..."(20). The strong feelings of these unions are reproduced hereunder:

The methods used to bust the strike - arrest and prosecution of organisers, excessive bail, the banning of public meetings, the seizure of strike relief, the use of military and para military forces, as well public servants, to do the work of the strikers and the mass recruitment and use of scab labour including child labour, from the ranks of the unemployed - recall the worst anti-labour practices of the capitalist bosses ... When all these is added the threat of detention without trial and of curfew under Part Two of the National Security Act, it is clear that we fight against a type of neo-colonial barbarism. The failure of the TUC even to issue a public statement to condemn the anti union actions must be seen as a direct challenge to those unions which respect and honour the long line of world trade union martyrs, which cherish the civil rights won by this and previous generations and which refuse to accept a

servile status for organised labour in any society .... Our unions will continue to consult one another on all matters, whether political or industrial, which affect the well being of the working class and will continue to raise issues which affect the well being of workers and their families. Our unions will oppose discrimination in any form and attempts to divide the working class ... will continue to denounce the recruitment of scabs, ... will continue to press for a solution of the outstanding issues in the recent strike .... must give a suitable response to the industrial politics arising from the new situation and would expect the TUC to do likewise (21).

These very strong declarations by the three unions resulted in the forging of an alliance with the GAWU. The "four unions", cynically termed "the big four" in government circles and by pro- government trade unionists, continued thereafter to agitate for improvement in the standard of living of workers.

### **An Analysis of the Strike**

There was an accusation by the government that the strike was political. Was the strike a political one? A political strike can best be described as one which seeks overtly to change a policy of the government or some other political decision (Cole, 1939:87). Given this narrow definition it would be easy to deem a strike as political, especially if it is called in a state sector in which decisions are made by the state, and there is not a definitive law which clearly explains the difference between a political strike and an industrial strike. The contentious character of the notion of a 'political' strike, and the different ways in which it may be defined, can be illustrated from British experience. For example, in 1978 the Court of Appeal in the UK made a specific ruling on what it deemed to be a political strike, when it heard the case of the BBC -v- Hearn. In this case "the Association of Broadcasting staff threatened to stop a transmission of the Cup Final by satellite to South Africa, in protest of alleged racist policies of the Government of that country... the Court held that there was not a trade dispute and granted an injunction restraining the union from telling its members to break their contract..." (Hain, 1986: 20). On this basis one would therefore have to limit the political strike to one which is used as a vehicle for political change and has nothing to do with a trade dispute, while Hain also explores the changing definitions

of what counts as a political strike in Britain in a way which underlines the controversial character of government and judicial decision-making in this area.

It should also be noted that in the UK supposedly 'political' strikes are now outlawed, while in Guyana and several third world countries they are quite common. In the UK there are also laws regulating the procedures on the calling of a strike while secondary action is prohibited by legislation (Mc Ilroy, 1995). In Guyana on the other hand there is legislation governing the calling of strikes only in essential services, and even those laws have hardly been followed by workers or their unions. Secondary/solidarity actions and political strikes are also quite common in Guyana. Why then did the government and Guysuco make the charge that the sugar strike was political?

Apart from the argument by the government that the union flouted the grievance procedure there were no other substantial argument to support their claim that the strike was political. However, some of the PNC supporters at the September conference of the TUC charged that the GAWU and the PPP leadership resorted to strike action in the sugar industry because of a breaking down of the unity talks between the PPP and PNC. While that interpretation could be attached to the strike to reinforce the government's position, there can be no doubt that the issue was a clear-cut industrial one. The GAWU maintained all along that the strike was over profit sharing. They had served an ultimatum to the employers in this connection. They showed every intention that they were prepared to end the strike at a very early stage once reasonable terms of resumption had been worked out. The violation of an agreement by a union on an industrial issue, especially one which is negotiable, does not render such action as political. The government's claim, therefore, that the strike was political appears to be without foundation.

Even if there was suspicion that the strike, which was based on an industrial dispute, may have been motivated by political considerations, the way to resolve it should have been based on industrial relations procedures rather than invoking political sanctions. To act on suspicion alone may result in an employer or the state running the risk of erasing an opportunity to resolve a conflict in a peaceful and harmonious

manner. The 1977 sugar strike should therefore be a lesson to trade unions, governments and employers on how not to settle differences. Industrial relations are governed by procedures agreed upon between management and labour and at times supported by legislation. If all the parties to the dispute had adopted a more flexible approach to the issue, the strike may not have caused the damage done to the industry and the nation as a whole and the significant loss in wages and sufferings to thousands of workers and their families.

The GAWU had been accorded recognition just a year before the strike. It had been involved in many bitter struggles with the employers and the state over a period of twenty five years, during which formal procedures and industrial relations practices were not observed by the workers or the union. Wildcat strikes had been routine in the industry. It would be inconceivable, then, to expect that a union and workforce grown accustomed to unconventional methods of struggles would, within a short space of time, be able to exert the necessary discipline to observe every agreement to the letter. It has been pointed out before that the union made a very impressive start in its relations with the sugar companies by signing three collective labour agreements without the recourse to strike action. However, it would be expecting too much from the union and the workers to allow an issue like the denial of profit sharing to go unchallenged in the midst of the foot dragging approach adopted by the employer, supported by the government.

The union had raised the issue with the employers and the government, albeit too late and not in a systematic manner. The leader of the PPP was engaging in discussion with the Prime Minister, while the GAWU was pursuing representations at the level of the industry. They did not get the satisfaction they were expecting. The government, however, set up the Crane Committee to investigate the claim by the union. The union participated in the first meeting of the commission in July 1976 but did not proceed in their representation at that level. Based on the Minister of Labour's letter to the TUC they did not explain their further absence at the Crane Commission. What seems to have happened was that, when the PPP leader raised the issue with the Prime Minister, the latter skilfully construed the union claim as one for profit sharing

from the previous owners and accordingly set up the Commission to investigate the claim with respect to that demand. The union, realising that the Commission was a waste of time, since the levy would have been sidelined, apparently saw no useful purpose in participating in its work.

What is clear, however, was the inability of the union to decide or influence the terms of reference of that Commission. To participate in a Commission, therefore, with unclear or unacceptable terms of reference to the union would have been legitimising the work of that Commission. Hence, abstention was thought to be in the best interest of the union. They apparently only saw the implications after their attendance to the first meeting and after they had agreed to submit a memorandum. The government continued to conveniently look at the claim by the union as profit sharing owed by the previous owners, while the union was very emphatic in its demand that the levy has robbed the workers of their profit sharing and should be withdrawn.

It is clear from this analysis that the union showed its inexperience in handling the claim within the industrial relations framework and on the procedures for the avoidance and settlement of disputes. It displayed its ineffectiveness in using the bargaining table to resolve the dispute. That weakness was exploited by both the government and the employer. The way out for the union, therefore, was to put the issue in the hands of the TUC which, incidentally, was controlled by the PNC. Like almost all the other issues which confronted workers, the TUC was quick to support the position of the GAWU, only to expose once again its inability to effectively represent the cause. When it was clear that frustration was prevalent among workers over the delay in finding a just settlement, the union resorted to what it knew best - the strike weapon - and served notice on the employer for strike action in February 1977.

At the behest of the TUC the GAWU shelved its action to allow that body another chance to seek to bring about a resolution of the dispute. Nothing positive came during the months of inactivity by the TUC, and when the GAWU served its second



ultimatum on August 20th, the TUC's request to GAWU to shelve once again its action was likely to have had a catastrophic effect on the union. A GAWU official explained later, when I interviewed him, that the workers would have seen the GAWU as a weak union and were likely to categorise it with the MPCA, which hardly represented their cause once recognition was accorded. This, the GAWU could not afford. Having to take the issue again to the employer in accordance with the grievance procedure would have resulted in further prolonging it and again exposing itself to the militant workforce. The union was forced to act in those circumstances, and had to find ways of overcoming the accusations of violation of the grievance procedure. One official of GAWU explained that the industry at times allowed workers to "let out their steam" and would then continue discussions on the issue which gave rise to such action. He explained that the union thought that it could have opted for the customary short protest, given the militant attitude of the workers, and then got into some sort of discussion with Guysuco thereafter. However, the response by the Government to the strike resulted in its protraction. He denied the accusation that the strike was called because of the failure of unity talks, but admitted that the timing of the strike could have given that impression (Interview :October 1994) .

## **The Government Response**

Why did the government respond in the way it did? A former senior Minister of the PNC government explained that the sugar industry has always been the base for support of the PPP. The PNC was in control of almost all the other sectors and if it could neutralise or weaken the PPP base then the PNC would have been in a position to control events without having to look over its shoulder:

The comrade leader you know was a man who never like to seek consent from anyone before he acts and Jagan was the only problem for him. He could always have outmanoeuvred Jagan, but had always to worry about the PPP support in sugar. It was for that reason why several attempts have been made at congresses of the PNC and at the Party Industrial Relations Committee(PIRC), to formulate a strategy to deal with the GAWU and NAACIE. The PNC knew that the strike would have taken place and the comrade leader said if this was the way Jagan will respond to his socialist

thrust by committing acts of destabilisation then he will have to be taught a lesson. The PNC was battle ready, hence, from day one the forces were marshalled into the industry ( Interview October :1994).

The additional employees recruited in the industry were perceived to be supporters of the ruling party. They were expected to join the UAAW along with some of the factory workers, thus giving that union a membership of about ten thousand. The PNC arrived at this calculation by assuming that most of the 4,000 workers who did not participate in the recognition poll were either from the factories or were former die-hard MPCA supporters. Therefore, they were likely to move over to the UAAW instead of giving their support to the GAWU. Many of these workers did not join the strike. Additionally the employment policy was also changed to recruit more workers from nearby villages, where the PNC had more support, instead of the housing scheme areas where the PPP and GAWU support was consolidated. This plan was intended to create a serious division among the sugar workers. It was further explained that, when it became clear that the GAWU was in agreement to call off the strike very early, the PNC was not prepared to change course. The GAWU had to go back to work without any deal. The PNC did not care at that stage about the cost of the strike to the economy. To Burnham's mind the investment was worth it (ibid).

The PNC might have been successful to some extent if its popularity was not waning among predominantly black workers, especially in the bauxite industry, and further if some of the tasks of sugar workers, especially cane cutting, were not strenuous and piece-work based, since many of their supporters were only inclined to be "pen pushers". It was not, then, very surprising, given the bad blood which flowed during the strike between scabs and strikers, to see the speed with which the new recruits joined ranks with their other colleagues to make demands at the local level, to improve job rates, extras for cutting bad or overgrown canes and other conditions of work, soon after the ending of the strike. Some of the scabs later became representatives and joined in other GAWU struggles at a national level. The PNC's desire to have the UAAW organising in the sugar industry was sheer wishful thinking. The only success story in the PNC's strategy was the fact that they starved the

workers and their union into submission without any of their conditions met. To the chagrin of many workers' representatives the union leaders never thereafter harboured the idea of recommencing the strike after its "adjournment". There were calls afterwards by the union for the removal of the levy but at no time was there an attempt to engage the workers in any serious and properly coordinated strike action over this issue.

### **An Analysis of the Disputes Procedure**

Was the GAWU's action in breach of the collective labour agreement? Based on a perusal of the agreement between Guysuco and GAWU, it is clear that a breach had taken place, that is, the procedures had not been followed to the letter by both sides. However when the circumstances surrounding the dispute are examined, along with national practices governing industrial relations, it would appear that the action taken by the union and the workers was supported by precedents. Hence, the method of calling the strike could be considered as normal. It has been explained by the Ministry of Labour official (Interview: September 1994) that there were instances where the TUC and the Government became involved in disputes before there were serious confrontations, and the disputes' procedures in those circumstances were not adhered to. The disputes were either settled or referred to some independent body or commission of enquiry for adjudication. There were instances where strikes had taken place on unresolved matters and accusations of violation of agreements were not made. Why should the GAWU have been asked then to follow the procedures when the matter was referred to the TUC at least one year prior to the calling of the strike? Having waited that long for a settlement to take place it was not a practice for parties to fall back on the procedures unless it was to merely iron out an agreement.

The TUC did, in fact, make representations to the Government on the matter. Even when the first ultimatum was served during the first sugar crop of 1977, the TUC became involved in the matter and the government entertained representations, but the matter was not settled and months elapsed. The additional point which surfaced was that the Honorary President of GAWU made representations to the Prime Minister,

who entertained such representations. In both instances, there was acceptance of some form of representation, which can be considered as higher stages than those in the dispute procedures when taken in terms of industrial relations practices in the country.

During the course of these meetings no firm advice was given to the GAWU on avenues open to it to have the issue resolved. The parties were seeking a solution but failed to arrive at one. The state did not put in train other options available to it in order to have the dispute resolved. What seemed to have taken place was open "filibustering" as the GAWU official later characterised it (Interview: September 1994). The government was hoping to kill the dispute under the pretext of continuing dialogue with the TUC. Having given the GAWU no guidance during or after those discussions, it would have been procedurally wrong to ask them to go back to the bargaining table with the employers months after tolerating the unofficial waiver of the agreement in the first place. If therefore it was seen as a requirement that the matter should be referred to the employer and GAWU to settle, then this request should have been made before the matter was represented or during the time it was represented at the governmental level by the TUC or at the level of the Prime Minister by Dr. Jagan. The information indicates that this was not done. What transpired, therefore, could be construed as a technical waiver of the agreement by all the parties.

Could the employer and union be the competent agencies to discuss a matter which had its genesis in legislation enacted by Parliament? Could an employer, especially a state employer, arrive at a decision with a union which would vary an Act of Parliament? Since Parliament is the supreme law making body in the land it is only Parliament which can change the law, unless the legislation is challenged successfully in the Courts. Outside a legal challenge only the Parliament could have varied its own legislation. The private owners of the industry prior to nationalisation had appealed to the government to reduce the levy as it was putting a severe strain on the industry. The Crane Tribunal of 1975 made a similar appeal, although the matter did not form part of its terms of reference. However, the government did not accede to this representation. Therefore, in as much as the dispute was a legitimate industrial

one, no employer and union negotiations could have resulted in a satisfactory settlement. The government had either to be coerced by workers or compelled by the Courts to change the legislation.

Based on the foregoing, what might have been a useful venture was for the union to challenge the matter in the courts, especially since profit sharing was part and parcel of a contract between the employer and the workers. It was and has always been a negotiated matter. In the circumstances, the question which was asked in the Teemal case might have had some relevance here: could parliament make laws to vary a contract entered into between two persons? When this question is discussed later it will be shown that a legal challenge could have been attempted. However, if this route had been chosen, it might have prevented the union from flexing its muscles on the matter, blocked any other avenue opened to it and would have taken years before a conclusion was arrived at. This option was therefore not considered by the GAWU.

Were there other avenue opened to the employer or the state in resolving this dispute? The investigations revealed that there were. When the GAWU served the strike notice although it was, as the Minister of Labour claimed, in violation of the agreement between Guysuco and the union, the corporation could have requested the prompt intervention of the Ministry of Labour as is the normal practice. The ministry could have called the parties together to try to work out a solution or allow for a breakdown at that level. Thereafter, either party to the dispute could have requested arbitration on the matter. If this course had been adopted by the employer and the GAWU had persisted with the strike action without attending any meeting, then Guysuco and the government would have had very strong grounds to accuse the union of bargaining in bad faith and transgressing the agreement.

The Minister also under the Labour Act Chapter 98:01 could have referred the matter to Arbitration once he was "satisfied that the dispute was injurious to the national interest"(s16). Again this would have either forced the GAWU to proceed to arbitration and allowed their members to cool off, or alternatively exposed them to criticisms for which they were unlikely to find a proper defence. These procedures

had been adopted several times before according to a very highly placed labour officer (Interview :September 1994). The failures on the part of the employer or the state to go this extra yard allowed for the very wide and costly confrontation which we have witnessed. What is clear from the investigations is that for good industrial relations to take place or succeed, the parties (that is, the employers, unions and the state) must ensure that at all times the intent and spirit of agreements entered into are observed by all. Intermittent variations of procedures and interventions by parties outside of the agreements, while helpful at times, may result in serious misunderstanding and perhaps a breakdown of the systems in place. The profit sharing issue and the question of the levy still remain vexed questions for sugar workers. Although the PPP in its 1992 election manifesto promised that the levy would be removed should that party win the elections, the levy is still in place more than two years after winning the elections. The PPP's Minister of Finance just after the 1994 Budget presentation told the national media that the sugar levy cannot be withdrawn. The GAWU's position on this matter will no doubt have a strong bearing on the future role of organised labour as it relates to political affiliation.

## **The Consolidation of Unions**

The four-union movement which was formed following the 1977 sugar levy strike played a major role on the industrial relations scene in sensitising workers and other unions to the problems confronting the working class. These unions, while maintaining their membership in the TUC, have been engaged in public campaigns against anti-working class measures adopted by the government and against the failure of the TUC to address many of those issues in a serious manner.

It was recognised that, for there to be effective representation and proper coordination of activities, the relationship of the four unions had to be formalised and according to a senior NAACIE official it was decided to convene a conference of the unions on June 24, 1979 at the headquarters of the CCWU to address the economic crisis facing the workers, their living standards, and the role of organised labour (Interview: October 1994). The keynote address was delivered by Ashton Chase of NAACIE,

who pointed to the fact that the TUC had been unrepresentative and unresponsive to several representations made by the unions which were organising the conference, on behalf of the workers of the country. Chase mentioned that:

things have reached such a stage now that the government keeps telling the workers that they must make sacrifices, and are trying to put the blame on workers for the lack of production and productivity. How can one produce when one is faced with shortages? The spirit of the workers is not there to make them produce(22).

He argued that there cannot be increased production and productivity when the basis to produce was absent, when the unemployment situation had become more acute, and emphasized:

This situation did not come about overnight, and the four unions sponsoring this conference take pride in the fact that together they had drawn to the attention of the authorities and to the TUC about the economic down slide in the country and how it should be handled. Even those proposals were pushed aside. The four unions had acted together on a number of matters drawing attention of the TUC on what should be done, but in almost every instance the Executive of the TUC have not sought vigorously and purposefully to do anything (23).

The TUC also came in for severe criticisms from economist Clive Thomas, who was representing the UGWU. He blamed the ruling PNC for the complete mismanagement of the economy, and posited the view that in the face of the deteriorating social and economic conditions facing working people the TUC had virtually done nothing. He denounced the TUC for sitting idly by and allowed the sugar workers to struggle alone during the 1977 strike. Thomas took the view that:

it was important to look at the various developments which took place in the period and the way in which the TUC reacted, and whether it is at all possible for new leadership to develop in the trade union movement, or whether it was at a point of no return... (24).

The matters raised at the conference had far reaching importance for the labour movement and the following resolution was adopted:

Aware that the TUC has betrayed the working people of Guyana by its political alignment at the leadership level with the oppressive ruling clique. Recognising that the postures and actions of the said leadership are at variance with the aspirations and interests of the working people and are a virtual sell out. Recognising that the mood of the working people is more faithfully reflected in the militancy of the four unions which sponsored this conference... Be it resolved that the four unions establish a permanent Coordinating committee to elaborate a programme of action designed to alter the affiliate structure of the TUC and the procedures for union elections along democratic lines and to ensure that the TUC becomes an institution which would uncompromisingly pursue the interests of the working people of Guyana by all means within the competence of the Trade Union Movement. Be it further resolved, that in the event of failure to achieve the necessary transformation of the TUC within a reasonable time, the four unions take immediate action to set up appropriate alternative structures to fulfil the aspirations of the working people of Guyana (25).

At the TUC Special Delegates Conference the year before ( November 11th and 12th, 1978), the four unions acting together had pressed delegates successfully to adopt a resolution which:

supports a programme for radical restructuring of the economic organs and administrative practices in our society including a defined and dynamic role for the Guyanese private sector.... But emphasizes that as a pre-requisite to redressing the economic hardships facing the nation a political solution is paramount in which all sections of the Guyanese working people would be involved in the urgent task of reconstruction (26).

As part of the follow up action, the TUC invited the leadership of the PPP to a meeting of the Executive Council on April 25, 1979 at which Dr. Jagan raised a number of important economic, political and social issues. The TUC, in seeking to justify its failure to act on the resolution passed and the proposals put forward by Jagan, had this to say:

What did come out finally in Cde. Jagan's presentation to the Executive Council was that the Government should be called upon to resign and an interim government set up comprising representatives of all progressive elements but should not include anti-communists. This point of view was also canvassed at a Special Delegates' Conference... where it was advocated that the Government should resign and a caretaker government established. The Executive Council felt it was in no position nor was it competent to pursue representations concerned with demands for the government's resignation. The



Executive Council did however, note a number of important points which it felt could be appropriately discussed with the government and the ruling party. Since then, the political climate rapidly changed and as a result it was felt that the prevailing atmosphere was not conducive to discussions on the points noted (TUC Report 1979:22).

The atmosphere which the TUC was referring to was a general strike called by the four unions in August 1979. Before that strike was called there were a number of protest actions initiated by the NAACIE and bauxite workers over the non-payment of increments. Thus at this stage efforts to build wider trade union unity continued between several important unions, but the TUC proved unable to facilitate such developments, because of its alignment with the governing party in a context of a highly politicised pattern of industrial relations.

### **The Government/ TUC Agreement 1977**

Finally, as an important background to an understanding of the 1977 strike, and the ways in which the unions, the TUC and the government acted, it is important to say something about broader debates and developments in wage bargaining during this period. From interviews conducted with senior workers' representatives in the sugar industry and the perusal of documents from several unions the following was revealed. At the 1976 TUC Delegates Conference a unanimous decision had been taken by delegates to authorise the TUC to make representations to the Government for an increase in the national minimum wage of \$5.50 per day to \$75.00 for a 40 hour work week. A national minimum wage has always been established periodically by the government after consultation with the TUC. This was done in order to ensure that workers, unionised as well as those without union representation are not paid less than the stipulated rate of pay. In several instances unions negotiated wages higher than those applicable as the national minimum wage. The bauxite, sugar, electricity, telephone and transportation workers, for example, were enjoying far higher wages than the applicable minimum wage of \$5.50 in 1976.

The proposal from the TUC conference had to do with the grim economic situation

facing the workers in the country at that time and to ensure that every worker was paid a wage which was considered to be just above the poverty level. The TUC, consequent upon the conference decision, engaged the government in discussions for an increase in the national minimum wage.

Following the talks which were concluded on 23rd August, 1977, a three year agreement was entered into, for a new minimum wage to be paid to public sector workers as follows:

- (a) for 1977 - \$1.05 per hour/ \$ 8.40 per day/\$200.00 per month.
- (b) for 1978 - \$1.35 per hour/ \$11.00 per day/\$258.00 per month.
- (c) for 1979 - \$1.75 per hour/ \$14.00 per day/\$333.00 per month.

It was also agreed that the cut off points for increases should be \$600.00 , \$925.00 and \$1200.00 per month for the years 1977, 1978 and 1979 respectively. The agreement also stipulated that for 1977:

10 percent of the national wage bill up to the cut off point shall be distributed to all employees within the organisation/enterprise favouring the lower paid employees against those higher up the pegged scale... for 1978 and 1979, the percentages of the wage bill to be used in the formula shall be discussed and agreed upon with the TUC... and negotiations for the new agreement with effect from 1980 shall take into account the minimum at 1979, i.e. \$14.00 per day.

There was also a provision for tax free incentives to be paid to all employees in every state enterprise, following the setting up a central incentive committee, which would "work out general principles for incentive schemes". Article 6 of the agreement on "Interpretation" indicates:

This Agreement shall be interpreted as an act of faith, and the Trades Union Congress and its affiliates will do everything within their power to ensure that in all sections and areas of activity, there is full production and increased productivity.

The TUC, therefore, had moved completely away from the mandate given and entered into a different agreement. This agreement was not stipulating a minimum wage at

the national level but was only intended for all public sector employees. Further, it had severely compromised affiliates who were negotiating separate agreements, since all agreements had to be negotiated "within the parameters agreed herein". They had to ensure, according to the 'agreement', that they did all within their powers to ensure that "there is full production and increased productivity" without any reference to the conduct of the state or its managers. This was the one sided nature of the agreement.

Even the TUC General Secretary conceded that the agreement was a disappointment to workers in the private sector when they learnt that the rates would be limited to the public sector, and he urged the unions in those areas to open negotiations in order to have the rates implemented. He admitted that the agreement could be criticised for not containing "an escalatory clause to take care of the prevailing inflationary price trends which may even accentuate with the implementation of the new rates" (TUC Report 1977: 6). He urged that delegates should not be concerned with the lack of such a clause but they should seek to mobilise the necessary commitment and energy which will have to be put towards increasing production and productivity in order that the negotiated package could be sustained by the country.

The signing of the agreement received a mixed reaction from affiliated unions, with the strongest condemnation coming from the NAACIE which claimed that the Government/ TUC agreement meant that unions would be denied the right to free collective bargaining and that the TUC should have consulted its affiliates before it had signed the agreement. It urged the four union alliance not to endorse the agreement. During the TUC Conference in September 1977 the alliance unitedly opposed the TUC's imposition. The two bauxite unions, GMWU and GBSU along with the MPCA and GFF & SU supported the position of the four unions.

Very soon after the conclusion of the TUC's conference it became clear that public sector managers were taking a united position at their negotiations with unions operating within that sector. The managers, while not admitting that they had received instructions from government, were sending very clear signals by their conduct that they could not negotiate outside the Government /TUC Agreement, which was

deemed by the employers as the maximum position. The union leaders were complaining at the TUC level over what they perceived to be an inflexible position taken by the state agencies during negotiations. All the unions were told that they must either confirm the agreement or have it imposed on the workers (TUC Minutes 1977). Because most of the leaders of unions within the TUC were supporters of the ruling party, many of the unions agreed and endorsed the agreement. However, much to the disappointment of NAACIE and to the surprise of some of the other unions which spoke against the TUC position, the GAWU signed an agreement with Guysuco on March 23, 1978.. It completely endorsed the 1977/1979 Government/TUC pact. The GFF&SU also took a similar position weeks later, which put NAACIE in the difficult task of being the only union in the sugar industry continuing the fight against the acceptance of an agreement entered into by strangers and without consultation.

The NAACIE's insistence on conducting genuine negotiations with the sugar companies was greeted by a tough response by Guysuco. At the bargaining table they were told "that they were obliged to abide by the National Minimum Wage Agreement and would implement same but hoped that an interim agreement would be signed before implementation"(NAACIE Minutes, December 11,1977). Following the submission of new demands by NAACIE on December 23, 1977, for improved salary scales to match the increase in the cost of living, the Guysuco immediately responded by copying a circular which it was sending out to all the sugar estates instructing the application of the Minimum Wage Agreement. This unilateral action resulted in the removal of certain conditions, in particular overtime formula and a Saturday off per month, enjoyed by some members of that union.

The Public Service Ministry on February 10, 1978 issued Circular No.5/1978 which negated a previous Circular No.70/1977 dated 17th December, 1977. The 1977 circular had been issued following the endorsement of the Government/TUC Agreement by unions operating in the public service and had authorised the implementation of the 44 hour work week. With the introduction of the new circular, workers were required to work beyond 44 hours per week. This action resulted in a

meeting between the TUC, the Minister of Labour and a representative of the Public Service Ministry. The Minister suggested that the 1978 circular should be withdrawn forthwith, to which all the parties agreed. Months passed without any action taken by the Public Service Ministry to rectify the situation and several employees were made "to work in excess of a 44 hour without receiving overtime on the completion of 44 hours" (TUC Report 1978:9). This was the beginning of all sorts of violations on industrial relations practices in the Public Sector.

The government's next move was to seek to rationalise the public sector labour force under the guise of redeployment. Some sections of the public sector had become over staffed in the early 1970s when jobs were created for party comrades. The government involved the TUC in the exercise of redeployment, to legitimise the policy. The manner in which the TUC was used in the process was evident, since representations made by them were not considered by the Government. The government gave the TUC the assurances that all the workers would be placed in similar positions at other governmental agencies, with no loss in wages. The end result was different. Nearly all of the estimated 4000 employees, (skilled and career public servants included) were offered cane cutting jobs in the sugar industry as the only alternative. About 3500 refused to take on this arduous task and found themselves added to the already vast unemployed list. Many of the union leaders of the workers interviewed felt that the dramatic decline in almost every section of the economy and the hardships which confronted workers, resulting in disguised retrenchment were the result of the government's hard-line position on the scab issue during the 1977 sugar strike, which had created a substantial loss of foreign exchange and revenue to the country.

The TUC failed to act to correct these situations, but worse yet remained silent while the democratic process was heavily undermined by the government's holding of a referendum to postpone national elections. This referendum was pronounced fraudulent by the Committee of Concerned Citizens (1978) and other international bodies. The opposition to the referendum, through a boycott, was in the vicinity of 85 percent - a position verified by independent observers. Amidst chaos on the industrial

relations scene and increased poverty in the land, the government had manipulated itself into office for yet another two years, through a fraudulent referendum, pending the writing of a new constitution. This provided the opportunity for them to destroy whatever was left in the Minimum Wage Agreement.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explains the repression of the workers' struggles by the state. It not only analyses the 1977 sugar strike but previous strikes by other sections of the work force. It seeks to explain the ineffective representation by the TUC on issues confronting workers, by showing how the political ties of the unions which dominated the TUC compromised their capacity to act to mobilise and unite workers, especially if this meant pursuing issues which impinged upon state policy. The 1977 strike, while focussing on the industrial issue of the sugar levy, took place against a background of a failure by the two main political parties to work out a political consensus against a so called imperialist threat, and this political context had important implications for the conduct of industrial relations.

It is established that while the workers were agitating for a decent way of life the leaders of the national labour movement were engaged in endorsing and pledging support to the ruling party. However, the failure of the TUC to effectively settle the 1977 sugar strike also resulted in four unions forging an alliance with a view to giving direction and solidarity to the workers' cause. Thus the political incorporation of the TUC did not effectively incorporate all workers and trade unions, and efforts to develop more effective union representation continued, in ways which will be explored further in later chapters.

In as much as strikes were having a detrimental effect on the national economy, and especially the sugar industry, the government was not prepared to make any compromise and sought, as it did with the 1977 strike, to force workers and their unions into submission. Thus it was not simply the politicisation of industrial conflict

which marked this period, but also the particular intransigence of the state. Once again we see, in a struggle which is perceived to have political overtones, how rigidity in attitudes can lead to a breakdown of industrial relations norms and the prolongation of a strike.

The introduction of centralised bargaining as a result of the negotiations between the unions and the government, led to the denial of unions' rights to negotiate individual agreements and to a complete breakdown of the collective bargaining process, wage impositions and retrenchment. The resulting violation of the national agreement, the wages imposition by the government and the further decline in the living standard of workers that then led to a bitter legal and industrial struggle by NAACIE, are analysed in the ensuing chapter.

#### **Endnotes:**

1. Taken from GAWU pamphlet "The Case of the Sugar Workers" (nd). NGCL Printers.
2. TUC Conference Documents 1976.
3. Letter by the Minister of Labour, Hamilton Green to the General Secretary of the TUC dated 27th October 1977.
4. WPA pamphlet "WPA Backs Sugar Workers. Stop Army Intervention in Labour Disputes".(nd).
5. Motion 16 on the Order Paper approved at the TUC Conference in September 1976.
6. Reported in Guyana Chronicle, August 14, 1977.
7. Information received from a former Field Manager's Clerk who was responsible for the distribution of working tools to the scabs.
8. Information was obtained from a PNC activist who was responsible for the recruitment of volunteers.
9. Letter to the TUC General Secretary from the five Unions, dated September 12, 1977.

10. Address by Basil Blair, President of TUC to the 24th Annual Delegates Conference. 22nd September, 1977.
11. Report of a Committee set up by the 24th Annual Delegates Conference of the TUC, dated September 24th 1977.
12. *ibid.*
13. Letter from Hamilton Green *op cit.*
14. *ibid.*
15. Letter dated November 2, 1977, from J.H. Pollydore, General Secretary of the TUC, to Minister of Labour.
16. *ibid.*
17. Letter dated November 3, 1977, from Bertis Bangaree, General Secretary, NAACIE, to Minister of Labour.
18. The resolutions were adopted on November 22, 1977, during the Second Assembly of the Caribbean Council of Churches in Guyana, following which a public statement was made.
19. GAWU press release dated January 5, 1978, announcing the end of the strike.
20. Joint Statement by the CCWU, UGSA, and NAACIE on the Sugar Strike, dated January 7, 1978.
21. *ibid.*
22. Notes of the Conference of the four unions, CCWU, GAWU, NAACIE and UGWU, held at Clerico House, Murray St, on June 24, 1979.
23. *ibid.*
24. *ibid.*
25. *ibid.*
26. TUC Special Delegates Conference Records. November 1978.



# Chapter 6

## Challenge To Wages Imposition

### Dishonouring the 1977 Agreement

In January of 1979, the government agencies were required to implement the \$14.00 per day as stipulated in the Government/TUC Agreement. This was not done and the government was suspiciously silent on the issue, resulting in a letter from the TUC to the Prime Minister on February 12, 1979. It urged that action be taken to have the agreement implemented without further delay. The Minister of Labour was requested to deal with the issue and one labour official who was interviewed much later indicated that this was seen as a bad omen, since the Prime Minister always liked to be in the company of the labour leaders when there was good news to be shared (Interview: October 1994).

The leading labour official pointed out that several meetings were arranged between the government and the TUC under the chairmanship of the Labour Minister. The Minister of Economic Development and Planning and the Head of the State Planning Secretariat led the government side against all the top leaders in the TUC Executive. A general picture of the economy was given, supported by statistical data, which pointed to negative growth and the poor state of the economy. The government side then took the position that, in the light of the poor state of the economy and the spirit of Clause 6 of the Minimum Wage Agreement stated above, there would be no increase in wages to workers for 1979. This decision was not only a violation of the aforementioned agreement but it was also in effect invoking a wage freeze for 1979. Asked about the TUC's response in the light of this imposition, the official referred to Pollydore's statement which he said reflected the feeling of the entire delegation. This statement was published in the TUC report in the following terms:

What the Executive Council could not accept was that the Government's inability to implement the \$14: per day was due to failure on the part of the

workers to increase production and productivity. This is exactly the misrepresentation... of Clause 6... which is being deliberately overworked by the government to propagate and to stress the culpability on the part of the workers. What must be examined in broader perspective beyond the workers' failure to increase production and productivity as claimed by the government, is what is responsible for this failure. It should not be overlooked that apart from strikes, lack of work discipline and other deficiencies on the part of workers about which so much is often publicised, there are instances of political decisions taken by the government in which the workers have no say whatever, but which decisions have a direct adverse bearing on production and productivity.... Then what about the apparent general state of malaise among workers which could seriously be attributed to the many threats from the governmental political hierarchy about closing down of projects, retrenchment, threats of, or actual dismissals and resignations not only of management but rank and file personnel likewise.

Even the fantastic energy inflation which subscribes to the higher import prices which we have to meet is being underplayed in order to stress the failure of the workers to increase production and productivity and consequently the justification for the government's decision not to implement the \$14: per day. In the meanwhile the cost of living continues to move up and the demands of the workers for economic relief are becoming more vocal (TUC Report 1979:8).

The official described the above statement as sheer anger coming from a General Secretary who is known for his polite and diplomatic language. He was very forthright in his condemnation of the government and no doubt would have liked to do something to ease the sufferings of the workers but may have been contained by the weak leaders who were around him. However, the workers' representatives in the sugar industry I talked to, looking back on the events, claimed that the TUC were 'mere paper tigers' and 'spineless individuals', for whom the government had absolutely no respect, since many of them compromised themselves by always seeking favours from the government and were involved in corrupt and undemocratic behaviour within their unions. They, therefore, could not be expected to fight fearlessly and defend the rights of workers (Interview: November 1994). In analysing the situation at that time Chase pointed out that the government had no acceptable solution to the economic crisis:

Their answer is to place more and more burdens on the workers and to blame everyone other than themselves. They wrongly blame the workers for the low productivity. They blame managers whom they appointed for bad management

practices, and the shopkeepers and hucksters for black-marketing. Their favourite ploy is to toy with the effects rather than tackle the cause of the crisis. The removal of subsidies, cuts in public expenditure leading to redeployment... increased prices for transport and electricity, and a wage freeze are burdens placed on the backs of workers. No other group feels the pressure like the workers. The direct impact on the workers' standard of living is terrific. The chronic shortages in our community due to the foreign exchange situation have made the burdens even greater...(1).

While the discussions were taking place between the Government and the TUC, the Sugar Corporation had awarded merit increments for 1979 to several of their workers, the majority represented by NAACIE, based on their performance over the preceding year. This was done following representation by NAACIE which drew attention to the existing collective labour agreement and the contract of their members. The agreement stipulated that a normal merit increment within the scales should be awarded annually to employees who gave satisfactory service over the preceding year. Further, the increment or part of it could be withheld only if the employee was warned that his conduct or performance was not of the required standard and this had to be communicated in writing to him/her at the time of the warning. If a worker was given such a letter s/he could make representations individually or through the union in accordance with the grievance procedure.

Workers in other industries, upon learning of the incremental pay out in the sugar industry began making their demands to their employers. The TUC, during the course of its meetings with the government, had made reference to the payout in sugar. The Cabinet thereafter instructed the sugar directorate to rescind the payments made and they obliged. In a circular letter in June 1979, to all employees concerned, the Corporation advised the following:

The anticipated growth of the economy for 1978 has not occurred... so far as Guysuco is concerned all persons eligible for normal increments within their respective scales, have received those increments with effect from January 1, 1979. It is not the intention to retrieve those payments already made, but we have to advise you, that with effect from June, 1979 your 1979 salary increment will no longer be paid. This means that your salary from June 1979 will revert to your December, 1978 salary.

Thus it was not only the case that salaries/wages of workers in 1979 remained at the 1978 level. What was worse was that workers had their increments, which they had earned through performance appraisals, taken away. They therefore suffered a double blow to their living standards.

## **Wages Imposition**

The TUC and the government conducted negotiations on wages and salaries up to 1987. The next increase the workers received following the 1979 wage freeze, was a 7 per cent increase for 1980. In 1981, while the TUC was meeting with the government to discuss the implementation of the \$14.00 per day for 1979, the government offered 10 per cent from January 1981 and a further 2.5 per cent from July of the same year. This was accepted by the TUC and imposed on the sugar workers. For 1982 and 1983 the government instituted a wage freeze. There was also a circular issued by the Vice President of Economic Development, which debarred the public sector managers from entering into agreements with unions for wages in excess of what was stipulated in the provisions of the national budget. Government Ministries, Corporations, and other Public Sector Agencies were informed that while the government was taking an integrated approach to the question of wage adjustments, some agencies were introducing measures aimed at circumventing the guidelines which had been issued. The devices used to go outside the wage guidelines included increasing fringe benefits, introducing new benefits, reclassifying or redesignating posts and signing agreements with retrospective application to previous years. The public sector heads were warned that they should not, without written authority from the Minister of Finance:

concur in or sign any agreement which contains salary or wage adjustments, fringe benefits or other conditions of service which are outside the terms of, or are inconsistent with, the Government guidelines or which will increase its budgeted employment costs (2).

The requests by unions in the sugar industry for higher wages were rejected and the employers claimed that they were obliged to follow the instructions issued by the

Finance Minister. It was not until November of 1984, when President Burnham announced that his government was increasing the minimum wage from \$12.71 to \$15.10 per day or \$360.00 per month, that the sugar workers were paid an increase of 10 per cent for 1984. This was done despite the failure of the TUC and Government to arrive at an acceptable increase.

The government and the TUC continued their dialogue while the workers were having the worst of it. Production in the two main sectors, sugar and bauxite, had declined considerably. The parties therefore agreed to a slightly higher wage award for these two sectors for 1985 and 1986 and announced that 12.5 per cent would be paid for each of these years. However, Guysuco did not apply the increases which were agreed between the TUC and Government. It insisted that it had already paid increments and as such would only increase wages by 10.08 per cent for 1985 and a further 6 percent for 1986. Repeated representation by the unions in the industry and by the TUC, up to the level of the Minister of Finance, failed to resolve the matter (NAACIE Report 1986:28). The minimum wage in the industry moved to \$16.83 per day or \$385.92 per month for 1985 and for the following year it became \$17.84 per day or \$409.07 per month. By that time the increase in the cost of living was taking its toll on the workers:

According to Professor CY Thomas, the real wages of the workers at the end of 1985 was about 60 per cent below the 1979 level, this will give you the extent to which wages lagged behind the increase in the cost of living (ibid).

The government and the TUC further agreed that the manner in which the application of wage increases was implemented over the years, led to workers with over 10 years service receiving the same level of pay as new entrants. Hence, an agreement was reached to correct the anomaly:

Employees who find themselves at the bottom or within a specified range from the bottom of the scales, after a number of years of service, will enjoy further adjustments which range from 5% for those with 3-5 years' service to as much as 8% for those with 8 years and above. This is intended to ameliorate the problem of long standing and new employees receiving the same salaries (Guyana Chronicle, 22. 11. 85).

However, the above adjustment was never implemented by Guysuco. According to the package arrived at with the Central Government, the workers were supposed to be paid 33 per cent increase in wages for 1984 and 1985, but all the sugar workers received was half of this. Despite the continued violations of agreements between the TUC and Government, no militant action was taken by the parent body of organised labour to rectify the situation. It seemed to enjoy a love affair around the bargaining table with the government. When the negotiation for wage increases commenced for 1987 the TUC held a press conference on February 4, and announced that it proposed a minimum wage of \$30.00 per day as a concessionary figure. It mentioned that in 1983 the TUC's Economic and Research Committee had produced figures which established the justification of a minimum wage then of \$52.00 per day.

After three meetings with the TUC, the government announced a massive 127% devaluation of the Guyana dollar. This was followed by an offer to the TUC of a new minimum wage of \$19.40 per day. Some members of the TUC delegation openly urged its acceptance when the NAACIE General Secretary and GAWU President mounted a vigil for one week in front of the Ministry of Finance while the talks were taking place. They denounced \$19.40 as way below the level of real wages of workers in the year 1940. In other words, the standard of living of workers in 1940 was far better than what was obtained in the 1980s. The two rebel leaders demanded that the government pay a living wage. Eventually, the government and the TUC agreed to a 16.37% increase across the board in addition to a flat monthly sum of \$100:

The two-tier adjustment of an across-the-board plus a flat sum of \$100. per month provided a more equitable means of wages and salaries distribution in the prevailing difficult economic situation. It constrained a widening of the differentials which resulted from a straight line across -the-board percentage adjustment (TUC Report 1987:9).

A tentative agreement was also arrived at for 1988 which provided for an increase of 5.5% across-the-board in addition to an appraisal component of between 5.5 and 7% of the wages bill as at December 31, 1987. There was a provision for an additional 1% increase "for every percentage increase in real GDP over 2% for 1987"

(NAACIE Report 1988:21). Once again the management of the sugar corporation imposed its own interpretation of the agreement. It only paid 16.37% increase for 1987 and 5% for 1988. By 1988 the daily minimum wage moved to \$27.24 while the monthly minimum was \$648.98.

## **Struggles Over the Increment**

Upon the notification of the withdrawal of increments by management, the NAACIE representatives claimed that the workers were enraged. They immediately sent out petitions to all the estate managers notifying them of their disgust and anger over the withdrawal of their increments and urged their reinstatement. The Executive of the union also met and took the decision to write to the Employers pointing out that the arbitrary withdrawal of the increments was in breach of the collective labour agreement in force, the contract of the workers and the law. It requested the Corporation to rescind the decision taken and further organised protest action on all the Estate locations. As one NAACIE official explained:

We organised a go slow exercise of the entire membership from June 26-30, several lightning one day strikes on a few locations, protest strike action for 10 successive weekends at Albion Estate, where the management had also unilaterally changed the Monday to Friday and Tuesday to Saturday stagger work week for some workers, and held a national sick out on Tuesday July 3, 1979 to register our protest. We tried to get a feel whether the other Unions were interested in taking a united stance on the matter but there was hesitation all around. We realised that the matter could only be dealt with through united action, since we were fighting against the entire state machinery. It was our position not to be engaged in an all out struggle before we can sensitise other workers and their leaders. We also asked our delegates to raise the matter at the four union conference and got in touch with some militant shop stewards in the Bauxite industry since they were showing positive signs of rebellion (Interview: November 1994).

In the midst of the sporadic action in the sugar industry, sections of the workforce in the bauxite industry came out on strike on July 12, 1979, also over the non-payment of increments, and very soon thereafter the strike engulfed the entire industry. The leaders immediately sought the TUC's involvement in the dispute. Despite several compromise proposals put by the TUC to the government and Guymine officials to

restore normalcy, the government took an adamant position that no wage increase nor increments could be given. The strike was therefore allowed to drag on and the four unions took a position to hold a public rally of workers at the Bourda Mall on Tuesday August 7, to decide on a strategy for intensifying the pressure on the government and the TUC to achieve a satisfactory solution. The meeting gave their wholehearted support to the striking workers and called on the TUC to demand from the government increments due to all workers. The conclusion of the resolution read:

Be it further resolved that failing to achieve these just demands within a week (by Tuesday August 14,) that the TUC calls on all its affiliates to take industrial action to enforce a settlement of these issues (TUC Report 1979: 22, iii; NAACIE Report 1980: 16).

Following that meeting, on August 10 the police raided the headquarters of NAACIE without a warrant and requested information from the typist about leading officials of the union. They seized a number of articles, including a duplicator, letter heads and other documents. They then arrested the typist, Miss Bibi Khan, and detained her for several hours following which she was released on \$500.00 bail, although she had not been told what offence was being investigated. The union was forced to move to the Courts before the police returned its duplicating machine. They did not return most of the other documents which were removed from the premises and during the trial the police revealed their reason for the search. They claimed that they had information that the union was involved in the publication of illegal literature and a news letter called "Yam Vine" which were in circulation within the army urging rebellion of the ranks against the government.

The strike in the bauxite industry attracted the attention of an unusually high security presence and there was no movement on the part of the government. The four unions dispatched a joint letter to the TUC on August 14th, which stated:

... In terms of the resolution you have failed to resolve the issues arising from the current bauxite strike within the time frame given and the workers are now undergoing great sufferings. Consequently, unless the matters can be resolved within the next twenty four(24) hours, our unions will take solidarity industrial action with the mine workers.



The unions simultaneously served notice on their employers to take strike action. The CCWU, on the other hand, moved away from a four union decision and decided that it was not going to call out its members in the private sector and was only going to call out its public sector workers for limited solidarity action at the start of the strike on August 17. One of the labour officials I interviewed claimed that this type of vacillation became a regular feature of the CCWU. He asserted that from the outset of the strike the government deemed it political and pursued a course aimed at crushing it (Interview October 1994). Several workers were beaten by 'thugs' of the ruling party, in the presence of a senior Government Minister, while they were engaged in picketing demonstrations outside of Guyana Stores Limited. The police, some without numbers, were engaged to break up the demonstration and seize pickets, the demonstration having been prohibited despite its legality. Bus loads of strike breakers were brought in to take the place of striking workers (NAACIE Report:1980). In an attempt to put further pressure on the CCWU, its General President, Gordon Todd was arrested and taken on a helicopter ride to a military outpost at Ogle. His whereabouts were unknown to other leaders, who witnessed the ruthless police action. After several hours in detention and on the prompt intervention of members of the Bar Association and the TUC General Secretary, he was released. Workers on strike were threatened with dismissal and foodstuff which had been collected by the four unions for striking bauxite workers was seized by the police. Membership forms for a PNC affiliated union, the GLU, were introduced at several locations of the militant unions with senior management functionaries coercing workers to join that union (ibid).

On August 22nd the CCWU instructed their members to resume duties. They claimed that they did so because of threats, intimidation and thuggery. Upon their members returning to work eighty of them, employed at Guyana Stores, had their services, ranging from 4 to 18 years, terminated(3). The government claimed that "in keeping with its policy of dealing with the political strike at a political level it took control of the situation at Guyana stores and had the supermarket reopened for business by 11.00 hours thereby saving the shopping public severe inconvenience" (Guyana Chronicle, August 18, 1979). These actions, along with the clear signal that the TUC

was not going to go beyond engaging the government in dialogue, forced the unions to review the situation. The bauxite workers who were virtually being starved out, met on August 25th, and decided that the strike should be ended, and this decision was endorsed by the four unions.

When the NAACIE members resumed duties on August 27, several of them were victimized. Ten were suspended for three days, 21 persons who were acting in higher positions had their acting appointments revoked, and this was followed by the confirmation of 70 scabs into permanent positions (ibid). While it could be argued that the government crushed the strike and forced the four unions to concentrate their energies in securing the reinstatement of the dismissed workers and correct the other acts of victimization, union officials argued that the strike ended as a moral victory for the workers. It laid the foundation on which solid working class unity could be built, with the involvement of the two bauxite unions in closer working relationships with the four Unions and the consciousness which had developed among bauxite workers.

There were many criticisms levelled by the four unions, and by many workers, over the inactivity and the failure of the TUC to take a decision to call a general strike, since the four union strike was intended to enforce the honouring of an agreement entered into by the TUC. The failure of the TUC to get the government to honour the agreement after months of negotiations, without any firm action being taken, exposed the ineffectiveness of this body. In answering these charges, Pollydore claimed that speakers of the four unions misrepresented the issue and made unfounded criticisms at the meeting of the TUC. By their action they undermined their own strength, by dividing themselves instead of seeking to work together notwithstanding whatever differences existed. Thus they became exposed to actions designed to exploit that division and accelerate the undermining of the process of building unity, and this was detrimental to the entire movement. He urged affiliates to understand that the overriding considerations for the TUC should be the need to protect fundamental trade union rights and freedoms and to address the problems of the dismissed workers (TUC Report 1979:15). The General Secretary stressed that the four unions had

served notice to the various employers in support of a sister affiliate which had a genuine grievance and therefore the action taken by them was reasonable and fell within the ambit of trade union solidarity:

The dismissal or other punitive action against workers who participated in the strike called by their unions, strikes at the very foundation of the trade union movement. It seriously undermines the universally accepted principles of trade union rights including the right to organise. It is a serious impairment of the fundamental principle of freedom of association (ibid).

While Pollydore was trying to defend workers' right to strike, some of his other comrades were forcefully defending the government's action of dismissing workers. Ajodia Singh of the UAAW claimed that the four unions' strike was intended to overthrow the government and to destroy socialism. He asserted that the workers must pay for their "stupidity and counter revolutionary work against the government" (TUC Minutes September 28, 1979). A leader of the GWU, Alwin Sinclair, claimed that the action by the government in dismissing the workers was justified, since the workers had embarked upon political action. He referred to the strike in 1963-64 at the Rice Board, where 144 workers were dismissed by the Jagan administration under similar circumstances. Therefore, he argued, since workers were engaged in "political strikes then they must get political treatment" (ibid).

What was somewhat faulty with the four unions' strike tactics was the lack of coordination among union leaders. Although the strikes in all the sections were over the withdrawal of merit increments, the actions taken by the unions did not allow for genuine solidarity to be forged. When the ultimatum was served by the unions in support of the bauxite workers, only NAACIE observed the decision of the four unions in its entirety. The other unions in the grouping varied the decision. As was explained earlier, the CCWU called out public sector employees for only one day. The UGWU had most of its members on vacation while the GAWU called out only four estates, Albion, Rose Hall, Blairmont and Uitvlugt, on strike. It was the intention of the GAWU to stagger their strike. However, the workers were in a mood to struggle, as can be seen from the figures in table 5.1.

**Table 6.1**  
**Strike Statistics during the Four Union Strike**

UNIONS	ON STRIKE	WORK DAYS LOST	WAGES LOST G\$	DURATION DAYS
GAWU	9706	77,377	12,671,167	8
NAACIE	905	8,145	1,200,013	9
BAUXITE	4379	97,261	1,968,130	34

**Sources: Ministry of Labour and Union Reports.**

According to representatives of the sugar workers, reflecting on the strike from the vantage point of the 1990s, united action by all the unions would surely have had a greater impact (Interview: October 1994). The strikes over the increments led to an overall increase in the workers involved and loss of work days over the preceding year. In 1978 there were 52,060 workers involved in work stoppages compared to 106,366 for 1979, with work days amounting to 75,971 as against 324,473 (Ministry of Labour Reports 1978, 1979).

### **Complaints To The ILO**

By September 5th, it was clear to the four unions that the government was not going to listen to representations by either the TUC or the four unions on behalf of the victimised workers, and they dispatched a complaint to the ILO pointing out the unorthodox and unconventional methods used by the government during the strike. These tactics were considered to be a violation of conventions 87 and 98 on freedom of association and protection of the right to organise and collective bargaining, both of which have been ratified by the government. The matter was investigated by the Committee on Freedom of Association which requested the government to respond to the charges brought by the unions. The government alleged that the unions were engaged in a political strike and that they were a faction of the TUC aligned to opposition political groups; that they did not avail themselves of discussions with their respective employers and engaged in solidarity strike action despite the fact that they were not requested to do so by the TUC or the GMWU.

In submitting its interim report the committee requested additional information from the government since it did not address the issue of violation of the agreement. The response by the government was sent on June 3rd, 1980, and it reiterated the charges levelled against the four unions and made mention of the Budget Speech by the Minister of Economic Development in which the reasons for non-compliance with the agreement were explained. It was emphasised that the agreement was an act of faith; there was a negative growth in 1978, a failure of the economy to generate earnings, a failure of export earnings to improve the balance of payments position and the impact of the wage increases. On the withdrawal of the increments the government disclosed that since the adjustment for 1979 was either an increment or an increase to the new rate, whichever was greater, the same reason for the non-enforcement of the agreement would apply. The government also informed the ILO that the workers at the May Day parade in 1979 supported the withdrawal of the \$14.00 per day.

In response to allegations that repressive measures were taken against pickets and demonstrators, the government claimed that the CCWU President was arrested for two hours for attempting to lead a procession for which there was no police permission, not even a request was made for such permission as was required by law. It denied that Todd was taken to a military outpost but asserted that he was instead kept in police custody to preserve law and order and that police baton charges or injury to pickets had not taken place. Allegations to the effect that the Minister of Labour was present when these violations had taken place were published in a newspaper. This was subject to a libel suit filed by the Minister, and as a result the government would only comment further on the matter at the conclusion of the case. Further, the government asserted that workers were dismissed only after they failed to return to work after the union had called off the strike, and that the matter was engaging representation from the TUC at governmental level.

The ILO Committee, in concluding its investigation into the matter with regards to the alleged non-implementation of certain collective agreements and the withdrawal of increments, found that the agreements were freely entered into by the workers organisations concerned and were understood to be interpreted as an act of faith, and

hence no violation of trade union rights had been proven. They also found that the arrest of a trade union official did not call for further investigation since there was no request for authorization to hold a procession. It recalled the principle that, although the right to hold trade union meetings is a basic requisite of the free exercise of trade union rights, the organisations concerned must observe the general provisions relating to public meetings which were applicable to all. The committee also requested to be kept informed concerning the outcome of talks between the TUC and Government on the dismissed workers and on the Court's decision on the libel suit brought by the Minister of Labour and pointed out that:

...one of the fundamental principles of freedom of association is that workers should enjoy adequate protection against all acts of anti-union discrimination in respect to their employment such as dismissal, demotion, transfer or other prejudicial measures and that this protection is particularly desirable in the case of trade union officials because, in order to be able to perform their trade union duties in full independence, they must have the guarantee that they will not be prejudiced on account of the mandate which they hold from their trade unions... the committee considers it appropriate to recall generally the principle that pickets acting in accordance with the law should not be subject to interference by the public authorities (4).

In assessing the report in retrospect a senior union official alluded to the fact that it is always difficult for trade unions to fight the government at international fora, like the ILO, since the government is more structurally and financially equipped to take on the trade unions. At times even lies from them can be taken as convincing arguments. In this regard, the government was not honest with respect to the dismissal of workers and the breaking up of pickets but it had the advantage of sending an emissary to brief the committee while the unions were not allowed the opportunity to reply to the government's half truths (Interview: October 1994). The ILO committee also overlooked a fundamental aspect touching on the right of individual unions to negotiate and preserve their agreements and the contractual obligations of employers to employees, based on their conditions of service.

## The Teemal Case

The NAACIE Executive had also taken a decision in August 1979 to pursue legal action on the withdrawal of the increments since its legal advisor had given an opinion that a strong case could be made out for a breach of the workers contract by the Guysuco. Writs were filed for hundreds of NAACIE members by Attorney at Law, Ashton Chase, who in consultation with lawyers for Guysuco decided that one of the cases should be pursued as a test case, with the decision for that case to apply to the others. The case for Seeram Teemal of the Versailles Branch came up for hearing before the late High Court Judge, Justice Francis Vierra.

The case for Guysuco, argued by senior counsel Lloyd Luckhoo, was based on the decision taken by Cabinet and communicated to all state agencies, over the non-application of the Minimum Wage Agreement, which they contended had replaced all other agreements (Trial notes). Chase, on the other hand, had taken the position, among other submissions, that a contract entered into by two parties could not be unilaterally varied by strangers to the contract and that the decision of the Cabinet could not be legally enforceable. The judge in deciding the case against the sugar industry was very critical of the decision taken by them and in addressing the issue of the authority of the Cabinet, he emphasised that he was unaware of any such proposition as a matter of law and no legal authority had been cited to support such a novel motion.

The decision of Vierra J. was taken up by Guysuco to the Appeal Court. Justices of Appeal, R.H. Luckhoo, Charles Fung-A-Fat and Keith S. Massiah who listened to the Appeal, upheld the decision of the judge in the first instance. Justice Luckhoo, who delivered the main decision pronounced thus:

It would be an alarming situation for an employee to be told by his employers that no matter what they have set out as their terms of employment they would reduce his salary at any time they thought fit and if he did not like what was done he could seek employment elsewhere. This would be contrary to all ethical, moral, and legal concepts. It is not done in civilised communities (5).

Touching on the issue of the common law the judge was forthright:

The common law governing contracts was, therefore, not to be ignored, but was to be applied by the courts in a proper discharge of their functions. A denial to a citizen by a court of relief for an infringement of his vested contractual rights would be tantamount to a denial of the rule of law. The rule of law is the foundation upon which is structured the system of true parliamentary democracy. That rule respects as well as protects the rights of the citizens granted under the constitution, under the statute law, and under the common law and equity...(6).

The Appeal Court therefore found that the employers had not honoured their obligations under the legally binding contract of service. After years of legal wrangling, the workers expected their retroactive pay out soon after the Appeal Court's decision in October 1983. This was in keeping with an undertaking in writing by Guysuco lawyers that any favourable decision for the Union in the courts would result in automatic payment for all NAACIE members. The assurance proved to be insincere since the union and its lawyer tried every possible way to get the employers to pay all outstanding sums of money owing to workers, but failed. Guysuco apparently was informed by the government that legislation was on its way to override the ruling of the highest court in the land. Hence Guysuco's refusal to honour the legal decision.

### **The Labour Amendment Act**

On March 1, 1984 the union served notice on the corporation to call its entire membership out on strike after the expiration of seventy two hours, if steps were not taken to start the pay out procedures. A general strike ensued from March 5, 1984. Although the majority of NAACIE members were operating in the service sections of the industry, the effectiveness of the strike resulted in a decline of production in the first week by about 25 percent. The reason behind the industry's refusal to make the pay out became clear when, on March 12th, the government tabled the Labour Amendment Bill No.5 of 1984 in Parliament. That bill was rushed through all its stages in Parliament four days later, without the consultation of the TUC provided for



in the constitution and in keeping with normal practice. It was approved by the required two thirds majority from the Government side - but this was a majority which had been obtained through another fraudulent election in December 1980 - and made law.

The Labour Amendment Act No. 9 of 1984 did three major things with retroactive effect to 1977. It altered the fundamental rights clause, Article 142 of the Constitution, in which wages were given protection and were regarded as part of a person's property. By removing that right, wages were no longer deemed as property rights and legislation could be enacted to interfere with workers' wages. Second, it reversed the Court of Appeal decision in the case of Teemal -v- The Guyana Sugar Corporation Ltd. Finally it made Collective Labour Agreements binding in law, including the 1977 Government/TUC Agreement, which took precedence over personal and individual union agreements and could override whatever an arbitrator might award to workers.

The Act intended to kill collective bargaining by individual unions in the public sector and replace those arrangements with TUC/ Government negotiations. It was therefore an attack on workers' rights to bargain collectively through a trade union of their choice. Moreover, it bound workers to whatever was negotiated between the government and the TUC but left the government free to renege on any agreement reached. The workers and their unions could be sued but the government was protected against litigation. The workers' wages were pegged at the 1978 level unless the President directed otherwise. Strikes were automatically barred except in cases where the unions observed the cumbersome procedures in their agreements for the avoidance and settlement of disputes.

What the legislation did not do was to ensure that the TUC functioned as a democratic institution. The undemocratic nature of the TUC had been a source of tremendous concern for a number of trade unions, which had been excluded from the decision making process of that body. So, whether the TUC's position was supportive of the majority or minority, the law allowed that body to bind all the workers in the state

sector to whatever decision it took with the government on wages. As Chase explained, the legislation took everything away from the workers but gave them nothing (NAACIE Report: 1985).

While the government was rushing through the Bill in Parliament the opposition PPP called for time to study the proposed legislation and to allow for the process of consultation to take place, but this request was not entertained by the Government. The TUC General Secretary, whose comment on the Bill was sought, wrote to the Minister of Labour acknowledging the receipt of three copies of the Bill only three days before it was due to be debated in Parliament. He therefore regretted the TUC's inability to offer any comments or recommendations because of insufficient time between the receipt of the Bill and the timing of the debate. The letter stated that the Bill had far reaching implications for the TUC, its affiliates and the labour movement generally.

There were demonstrations in front of Parliament by union leaders and workers from both the sugar and bauxite industries and other civic minded citizens. The Guyana Human Rights Association was critical of the Bill and called for its withdrawal. Among the other reputable organisations which condemned the action by the government were the Guyana Bar Association, which described the Bill as:

A bold, shameless and barefaced act to reverse the decision of the Court of Appeal whose fair and unbiased ruling reiterated the fundamental right of the workers to be paid wages as due (7).

The GAWU members took one-day solidarity strike action on March 16th, and had taken a decision not to perform work which fell within the NAACIE categories. With the passage of the legislation and the tough stance of the government the NAACIE decided to end the strike on March 20th, and to challenge the legislation in the Courts. This was yet another example of how the state apparatus could be used to crush workers' struggles. According to another workers' representative with experience of this period, on this occasion the state did not resort to violence and other repressive actions during the demonstration as in the past. It could not have accused the unions

of engaging in political strikes, since the workers' union did everything within the law to redress a wrong committed against them by the state. The workers were on this occasion greeted by the action of an oppressive Parliament. The union, it was pointed out, was not only fighting the employer but also the state, supported by its legislative power in a 'rigged' parliament (Interview: November 1994).

However, an area of concern mentioned during the strike had to do with threats made to Senior Staff whose children were on strike, to ensure that they go back to work or face eviction from the estates' premises. The daughter of the Assistant Office Manager at Albion, Miss Rambarose chose to resign her employment rather than break the strike. When the strike was over several acts of reprisals took place; in particular the Corporation revoked the acting appointments of several militant union members who were acting in higher capacities, some of whom were due for promotion, and refused to deduct union and credit union dues from workers' pay based on the check off agreement. The union, having been informed of these developments by their members, wrote to Guysuco pointing to the breaches which had been occasioned by its action. It was then that the corporation gave its first reaction since the union's ultimatum, one month after it was served and ten days after the strike ended. This accused the union of breaching the procedural agreement for settling disputes and confirmed that the deductions of dues for March had not taken place. After several exchanges of letters between the parties the deduction of dues re-commenced from April 18, 1984 (NAACIE Report 1984: 23).

The union also expressed concern over the mysterious fire which extensively damaged the car of its General Secretary, the day after the strike was called off and five days after the police special branch had made enquiries concerning the model and number of his car. The manner in which the fire occurred was unusual, in that the gasoline line broke in the area of the driver's seat and fire flared up through that part of the car while he was driving, which reinforced the point of the union and FITUG that it may not have been an accident (ibid). Another car belonging to the General Secretary was also permanently disabled by a sticky substance believed to be sugar, which was found in the oil, two days after he spoke at a public meeting (8). Other

persons opposed to the regime have had their cars sabotaged as a means of affecting their mobility, since new vehicles were not available to the public, only those allocated by the government to state and party officials. Spare parts were also difficult to obtain due to the chronic shortage of foreign exchange (ibid).

## **The Labour Amendment Act Challenged**

The challenge to the legislation was led by NAACIE members Mohamed Ali, Roopnauth Durshan and Durbal Budhai. They were represented by Ashton Chase associated with C.R. Ramson and others, with Justice Clifford Baburam presiding in the High Court. The application to the Court was by way of an originating motion, which the lawyers felt was a well established practice of common law and a desirable form of procedure which provided a convenient and expeditious way of approaching the court. The State's case was presented by the Attorney General, Mohamed Shahabuddeen, assisted by the Solicitor General, Julian Nurse and others from the Attorney General Chambers. The hearing on the matter commenced on June 27th, 1984 and ended on September 27th, 1984. However, the decision was not given until March 7th 1986.

After the months of legal arguments supported by affidavits and an agonizing period of waiting, the trial Judge ruled in favour of the respondents/applicants. Ali and others were elated over the outcome. The Judge struck down two obnoxious pieces of the Act as 'colourable legislation' and a denial of natural justice. In his very lengthy judgment the judge made some important pronouncements in which he asserted that :

One cannot but come to the conclusion that the pith and substance of section 7 was a legislative plan ex post facto to prevent the enforcement of the Teemal - v- Guysuco judgment and not to enforce the undertaking given by Clarke and Martin (Guysuco Lawyers) with respect to the other public sector workers of NAACIE in respect of whom such undertaking was given. It seems to be that once the Act is used to defeat the Public Sector workers in respect of whom a clear undertaking was given, the Act had no more utilitarian value. In my judgment, the language of the enactment of Section 7 was such that no other conclusion is possible, that was the intention of the legislature. I hold, therefore that the plaintiffs/ applicants have satisfied the burden of proof

which lies on them to show that there was a clear transgression of constitutional principle, which is discriminatory in its effect and a violation of the Article 149 (9).

Thus the judge found that section 7 was 'colourable legislation' and noted that, while Parliament had acted in exercise of its undoubted power, what it did in reality was to disguise and transgress that power. He therefore made a declaration which struck down the legislation as being a violation of the Constitution of Guyana. By this decision the increments of members of the union were restored.

The other section which was struck down was 28c of the Act, which gave the TUC bargaining rights on behalf of all public sector workers. Counsel for the union had argued that this section collided with the freedom of the individual to have a trade union of his choice, which in effect is a transgression of the fundamental rights of Freedom of Association, calculated to hinder that freedom and therefore in clear violation of Article 147 of the Constitution of Guyana. The section also contravened ILO Conventions 87 and 98 which have been ratified by the Government.

Further, the section made a mockery of collective bargaining when the TUC Executive comprised of members of the Cabinet, the Ministers of Labour and Agriculture and a Parliamentary Secretary, some of whom had been sitting on the Government side at times of negotiation and then attending Executive Council meetings of the TUC. They were therefore privy to all the strategy and information coming from the TUC. The confidentiality which is so necessary in collective bargaining could not be maintained in those circumstances. While it was also not obligatory for unions to be members of the TUC there was also no proof that the individual worker had decided to opt for the TUC to be his bargaining agent. The judge upheld the arguments of counsel for the union members and made the following ruling:

Firstly, if the TUC is to pursue collective bargaining as an agent for an individual union, can there be meaningful and effective negotiations with the government if one or more members of the TUC is also a Government

Minister or at least holds an influential position with the government? The enormity of the influence that government member can exert on other members of the TUC must never be underestimated. A trade union needs not only freedom of association but also freedom to organise and to bargain effectively and collectively. The element of fraud misconduct or partiality cannot be ruled out during the course of such bargaining with the government officers being members of the TUC. I rule and hold that the plaintiffs have shown affirmatively and have discharged the burden of proof which lies in them in showing that section 28C is a breach of natural justice and that it is unconstitutional and ultra vires the Constitution of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana and is hereby struck down as invalid (10).

The government appealed the decision on March 10, 1986 and Court of Appeal Judges, Chancellor, K.S. Massiah, and Justices of Appeal, C.J.E. Fung-A-Fat and R.H. Harper presided at the Appeal which began on October 20, 1986. Counsel for the union members raised three preliminary objections. Arguments and deliberations on these took almost eight months. The first objection was that the Court of Appeal lacked the jurisdiction to hear and determine the matter. However, the Court ruled otherwise. Then there was the motion that the appeal be struck out because the service of the notice of appeal to the union members, who were the respondents in the case, did not conform with certain rules of the Court. This motion was also disqualified. Finally, there was a motion in which the union members sought to disqualify Justice Fung-A-Fat and at the same time set up a panel of five Judges instead of three.

The reason for the union members seeking to have the judge disqualify himself was based on a sworn affidavit by Attorney At Law B.E.Gibson, which stated that in a previous trial the "learned Justice of Appeal said and repeated that anyone having complaints about any Act of Parliament must make his representations there and should not bother to come to the Court of Appeal (11). The case for a panel of five Judges was supported by affidavits of leaders of several trade unions, including, the NUPSE, CCWU, GAWU, GMWU, GBSU, UGWU and NAACIE, in which they stated that they had been following the case with great interest and in view of its importance they were supporting the call for a full bench of five Judges. The Justices of Appeal again ruled against the union members and the substantive appeal was heard from June 17, 1987.

The unusual speed with which this appeal came up for hearing was worrying to the union and their lawyers since there have been many bitter experiences on decisions handed down in cases against the state. This prompted Senior Counsel for the union, Ashton Chase, to write to the Chancellor of the Judiciary to point to the number of outstanding cases which were pending for longer periods, some touching on the Constitution and Fundamental Rights, yet they had not been listed for hearing nor records settled:

I am sure you will be sensitive to the fact that such unusual haste on the part of the judicial machinery in a matter which involves the interest of the government can only cause the respondents to become disquieted at the neutrality of the judicial process; coupled with the information that is at large as to where the original notes etc. of the hearing have been typed(12).

There was a measured but what can be considered a comforting response from the Chancellor, in which he referred to actions which he had taken to have cases heard speedily and informed the union members counsel that it was his perception:

that rumour feeds on prejudice, and that people will believe what they want to believe. Undaunted, I shall continue to direct attention to the scourge of delays. That is why I am particularly interested in your reference to your constitutional appeals. If you write me about them I shall be pleased to ensure that they, like all other constitutional matters, are given priority on the calendar (13).

The fact that counsel for the union sought to register his concerns to the Chancellor and the attempts made to have the matter heard by a full Bench of five Judges gave an indication of the extent to which fear and uncertainty had gripped the society and the prevailing lack of confidence in the judicial system. Several union leaders had taken the position that the government's decision could never be challenged successfully in the courts and refused to have their unions joining in the matter at its early stages in 1979. Their decision was based on the overwhelming examples of unsuccessful and costly legal challenges against the State. As one leader later emphasised: "We were in Burnham Republic; and whatever Burnham said or do, no one would dare to challenge or go against" (Interview, October 1994). They also feared that their unions would have risked financial bankruptcy if they were to be

engaged in such a challenge. From an examination of the many issues involved and days spent in Court, during the duration of the trials which lasted almost a decade, their fears might have proven correct.

It was the NAACIE General Secretary who tried to examine what the legal cost might have been for the union if they did not have the services of Ashton Chase and his committed band of associates. He explained that, luckily, the union did not pay a cent as legal fees, but if they had had to, they may have had to sell their Building to finance that struggle. That was the enormous sacrifice which Comrade Chase and his colleagues made to the struggles of the workers of the country. My informant emphasised that Chase's dedication to the cause of the workers has been a source of inspiration to others (ibid). He further explained that one of the reasons why unions have been unable to genuinely fight the government was because of their weak financial situation, which the government has been very much aware of. Several trade unions operated on a shoe string budget, sometimes having an overdraft and mortgages and grossly underpaid officials.

For this informant, this issue was directly related to a very serious problem of the movement, which has to do with accountability and lack of democracy. Only a few trade unions have their accounts up to date. The majority which have been affiliated to the ruling party then have often been given favours and financial assistance allegedly through the infamous Ministry of National Mobilisation (which was later dismantled by the Hoyte regime). That is the reason why, he alluded, in most of the struggles in the late 1970s and early 80s, the first thing that came under attack was union dues (ibid).

The fear and uncertainty which had engulfed the minds of many workers and their leaders were soon laid to rest when after twenty three days of legal arguments in the substantive case, the decision was handed down on October 28, 1987. The Justices of Appeal unanimously upheld the decision of the trial judge and disallowed the Appeal by the Government. In confirming the decision of the judge in the first instance, that section 7 of the Act was invalid, the Appellate Judges found that it:



sought to keep wages for 1979 at their 1978 level. Thus persons like Teemal who were granted increased wages in 1979 could no longer claim them, and this was so even where, as in the Teemal's case a court had declared that the person was at law entitled to receive his increased wages. Thus wages were in effect seized by the state. Such a position is strange to common law (14).

With respect to Section 28, the Chancellor and Fung-A-Fat J.A. found by a majority decision that it was enacted in clear violation of the constitution. They found that there was a failure on the part of the government to consult the TUC or any individual union, in clear breach of the important constitutional provisions of Article 11. They asserted that the Minister ought to have consulted with those bodies and his failure was a grave omission. In the light of their understanding of Article 38 of the Constitution, it would be palpably wrong for them to hold that section 28C of the Labour Act was valid.

The extent to which the government moved to block the payment of the increment was exposed by Senior Counsel Ashton Chase, representing the workers, when he explained that what the government sought to do was to amend the Constitution of 1980, to seize wages which fell due in 1979 and were protected by the previous 1966 Constitution. To do so successfully they had to amend Article 8 of the 1966 Constitution which protected wages and this had to be done before the promulgation of the 1980 Constitution (Trial Notes). Their Honours upheld the submission and pronounced that they found:

it difficult to understand how the present constitution could be amended to have effect in 1979 when the present constitution was not then in existence. You cannot amend a provision which does not exist. That the constitution could be amended retrospectively as far back as the date when it came into effect.... But it could go no further.... There is in being no constitutional amendment that properly permits the compulsory acquisition in 1979, and section 7 of the Act which purported to do so is invalid... and accordingly cannot stand (15).

With the ruling of the courts for the fourth time going in favour of the workers it was widely believed that this chapter of workers' struggles, over the payments of increments, would have been ended, and the decisions of the Courts would be honoured. But again the government moved to Parliament to enact a further piece of

legislation. The Constitution Amendment Bill was advertised in the Guyana Chronicle of November 29, 1987. The Ministry of Legal Affairs pointed out that the Bill was not intended to affect the financial entitlement of any person pursuant to any judgment of the Courts (16). What the Bill sought to do was to amend Chapter Two of the Constitution, which provided for consultation with trade unions, cooperatives and other social and economic organisations prior to the enactment of any new legislation, and to make the said chapter legally enforceable only where there is legislation enacted for that purpose. The government claimed that the proposed amendment to Chapter Two was necessary, since the 1980 provisions led to rigidities which impaired the value of consultation. The Bill also sought to prevent any law made under the present constitution, which took effect from a date prior to the commencement of the new constitution, from being challenged :

in any court or tribunal on the grounds that it contravenes, or is inconsistent with any provision of any constitution which was in force in Guyana at any time before the day on which this constitution commenced (17).

This amendment permitted the government to pass retroactive laws to a date prior to the promulgation of the 1980 Constitution, even if those laws were inconsistent with provisions of the previous constitutions, without anyone being able to challenge the amendments. The right to wages or any other Fundamental Rights could be attacked retrospectively. In explaining the serious nature of the Bill, Chase explained to union leaders that there must be a repugnance over such wide powers of Parliament, particularly since the laws cannot be challenged. A citizen would not be able to sleep in peace in such a situation (NAACIE Records). Several organisations from almost every section of the Guyanese community came out openly in opposition to the Bill. For the first time in many years the TUC took a very strong position, but again on paper, against the government. The Bill had a direct bearing on the relation between the government and the TUC because it was removing the right of that body to be consulted on legislative matters. While expressing its opposition to the Bill, the TUC also called for dialogue between workers and their trade unions and the relevant government agencies for the purpose of determining the categories of workers who were entitled to the payments in keeping with the decision of the Courts. This, the

TUC asserted, should be given priority, not the initiation of amendments to the Constitution (18).

The militant union grouping comprising of the GMWU, GAWU, CCWU, NAACIE and UGWU, along with the GHRA and GBA, opposed the Bill and staged demonstrations against it. In a joint statement they stated that the bill was seeking to reverse the decision of the Court of Appeal, by making Sections 28c and 7 of the 1984 Labour Amendment Act valid as if they had never been struck down by the Courts, and they argued that, by removing the legal right to consultation, Chapter 2 of the Constitution "becomes mere verbiage....The constitution cannot be respected if, whenever the government violates it, amendment is sought to legalise its violation" (19). The opposition parties in Parliament demanded the withdrawal of the Bill but despite the pleadings, wave of protests and widespread opposition, the Bill was passed in Parliament on February 15th, 1988.

### **The Final Encounter**

Based on the undertaking from the Ministry of Legal affairs that the legislation would not affect the workers who had successfully challenged the withdrawal of increments, the NAACIE made representations to the sugar company to have meetings arranged to work out an agreed formula for the pay out. While a meeting was promised by the Corporation, weeks passed without any being held, while the corporation was taking steps to make the pay out based on their perception of the Courts decision. Members of NAACIE had reported that the pay out, wrongly calculated, was about to take place unilaterally and directly to members, unlike in the past when the payments would have been made through the workers legal representatives to avoid any miscalculations from taking place (NAACIE Report 1988: 35).

Recognising what was taking place, union representatives explained that the workers signed a petition authorising the Corporation to pay over to their legal representatives all monies due to them (ibid). Their lawyers were also instructed to issue valid discharges in respect of the payments made. The corporation did not adhere to the

request of the workers, and their lawyers were forced to seek a restraining order which was obtained and entered on 24th May 1988 by Justice Nandram Kissoon, and which prevented the Corporation from making payment directly to its employees. The Government sought to sow seed of disunity among the rank and file by using the state media to accuse the lawyers and union of seeking to rob the workers of their full settlement. They claimed that the lawyers were seeking to have the payments made through them because they wanted to make deductions from the workers for legal representation (ibid: 33).

The corporation was able to secure the removal of the restraining order, and this was followed by months of delay and refusal to meet on the matter, despite repeated requests from the Union. It was not until December 1st, 1988 that the corporation responded to a union letter, and explained that the reason for not meeting was because the matter was the subject of litigation. However, the union pointed out that the issue under litigation had nothing to do with the working out of a payment formula (ibid). The corporation was prepared to defy the union on the matter and went ahead to make the pay out on March 17th 1989. All the Corporation did was to pay the increment which was taken away for 1979, although in principle the commitment was for all the years that increments were not paid. The union sought the support of the GAWU to take strong industrial action against the Corporation to enforce the right calculation, since some of their members were also affected, but that union did not agree to take any action (ibid). Consequently, the workers were not paid increments for the years 1982 and 1983 when a wage freeze took place. Workers who were promoted were also denied retroactive payments beyond the date of promotion. One year later, some workers at the Head Office still had not received their payouts, but the situation was remedied through representation by the union.

The NAACIE, having pursued the matter legally alone and won the case at every stage within the legal system, needed the support of other unions to enforce the correct interpretation of the Appeal Court's decision in the light of Guysuco's imposition. However, it did not receive that support and the workers were 'short changed' (ibid). Even the lip service paid by the GAWU did not help the situation. In a

critical statement against the government for seeking to deny sugar workers their increments arising out of the Teemal case, this is what GAWU had to say:

This is an attack on democratic and trade union rights. It has become the centre of struggle for trade union democracy in Guyana. The battle initiated by NAACIE and ably championed by Cde. Ashton Chase, Attorney-At-Law, led to a significant victory. It further help to unmask the anti working class character of the government ( Combat #3: 1988).

Throughout the duration of the legal battles, the process of free collective bargaining in the Public Sector had not taken place. Any union wishing to sign an agreement had to do so by endorsing what wage increases were imposed by the Government and based on the Finance Minister's Budget provision. There were unions which happily accepted the government's handouts. A union official humorously called this process "the offer and acceptance rituals - not negotiations". The NAACIE, he explained, could not have been a party to such an exercise. Further, the unions were not prepared to collectively fight the issue. By contrast NAACIE did not sign any collective agreement to incorporate wage increases for over a decade between 1977 and 1987 (Interview: October 1994).

From the experiences of the past, this kind of struggle had to be pursued by the entire labour movement to be effective. With no sign of unity the workers, included those in sugar and bauxite, had to contend with the arbitrary increases imposed by the state, and with respect to the years 1982 and 1983 settled for no increase at all. This as how Chase summed up the lack of response of the other unions in this struggle, especially from NAACIE's sister union:

It is a matter of considerable satisfaction that our union can hold its head high and look back with pride on its singlehanded achievement in defeating aspects of the Labour Amendment Act and securing for our members and others in the sugar industry the retrospective pay, of which the Act was designed to deny them. Several GAWU categories benefitted from the struggles.... It was NAACIE's unwavering struggle that made this possible. Despite approaches, our sister union did not join in agitating for the correct pay out, and this lack of interest has resulted in GUYSUICO retaining the fruits of their exploitative calculations. Good though this victory has nonetheless been, it is another instance that demonstrates the need for unity. It is a pointer to the limitations of one sided action (NAACIE Report 1990 :2).

There were some forms of resistance during the period of the legal challenges but these are discussed in the ensuing chapters. When the decision on the Labour Amendment Act was handed down by the Appeal Court, it was clear that centralised bargaining was dealt a serious blow. In fact, it was consigned to the cemetery where it was given a decent funeral. Following that decision the TUC advised that:

having regards to the decision of the Appellate Court, they (the unions) were in a position to proceed with negotiation conclusively under the existing collective Agreement between the unions and employers (TUC Report 1988:15).

This paved the way for some semblance of collective bargaining to resume. The oligarchy's control of the bargaining table was slowly being brought to an end.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen how the government's rigid position on wages led to the violation of the '1977 Agreement' with respect to the year 1979. Despite the fulminations by the TUC, there were wages impositions for some years and the freezing of wages for other years during the period 1979 to 1988. These tough measures were introduced following the economic decline in the country. The wage freeze imposed in 1979 also led to the withdrawal of increments earned by and paid to NAACIE members. Sporadic protest actions by the workers and their union failed to secure the reinstatement of the increments.

As a result, the NAACIE successfully challenged the government's decision in the High Courts of the country. This led to an appeal by the State of the Judge's order in the first instance. The ruling of the Appeal Court in favour of NAACIE led to the refusal by the government to honour decisions of the Courts, and to the introduction of legislation aimed at circumventing those decisions. Although there was an alliance of progressive unions in the country, the NAACIE was unable to secure their support as well as that of the TUC in coordinating a unified struggle on this issue. Further protest action by NAACIE along with un-coordinated action by bauxite workers did

not assist in a resolution of the issue.

After the legislation was rushed through Parliament, the NAACIE once more challenged the latest government move in the Courts, where the ruling was favourable to the union in both the High Court and the Court of Appeal. Despite the favourable decisions by the highest court in the land, the government again displayed its stubbornness and failed to give full effect to the award of the Court. This established as an incontrovertible fact, that laws and procedures alone do not help in industrial relations disputes. At times it might be necessary for workers to be engaged in effective and united action to help bring about a resolution of disputes.

More generally, then, this chapter has traced a further twist in the relations between unions and the state, and has shown that legal remedies do not readily resolve the dilemmas facing unions and workers in a highly politicised industrial relations environment. They underline the power of the state, even a relatively small developing state, to repress unions and to circumvent 'due process', and they also underline the challenges facing unions in such circumstances.

#### **Endnotes:-**

1. Address by Ashton Chase, General President, of NAACIE, to the 33rd Annual Delegates Conference of the Union. May 26, 1979.
2. Circular dated 1982-02-02 from the Vice President, Economic Planning and Finance, to all the Heads of Public Sector Agencies.
3. Information taken from a letter dated August 24, 1979 by the CCWU to the TUC.
4. The case to the ILO is referred to as Case No. 941. It was reported in the 199th Report of the Committee of Freedom of Association.(para 313-335) in March 1980 and in the 204th Report,(para 271- 284). November 1980.
5. Judgment of R.H. Luckhoo J.A. in the Civil Appeal No. 43 of 1982. Between the Guyana Sugar Corporation Ltd - and- Seeram Teemal. Georgetown, Demerara. 20th July, 1982. pp12/13.
6. *ibid* p16.

7. Press Release of the Guyana Bar Association dated March 14,1984.
8. NAACIE Press Statement dated March 14,1984.
9. Decision of Hon. Mr. Justice Baburam in case No.13 of 1984, between Mohamed Alli et.al. -v- The Attorney General of Guyana in the Appeal Records pp338-339.
10. *ibid* pp 307-308.
11. Taken from the Affidavit of B.E .Gibson, dated October 14. 1986, for Civil Appeal No.15 of 1986. (AG.-V- Alli et al.).
12. Letter from Ashton Chase, SC. to the Chancellor of the Judiciary dated March 25, 1986.
13. Letter dated 2nd April, 1986, from K.S. Massiah, Chancellor, to Ashton Chase.
14. Judgment of Massiah. C. In Civil Appeal No.1 of 1986. The Attorney General and Mohamed Alli, et al. p 43.
15. *ibid*. p 47.
16. Statement from the Ministry of Legal Affairs dated 28th October, 1987.
17. *ibid*
18. TUC Memorandum dated January 4, 1988 to Vice President of Legal Affairs.
19. Press Statement from GAWU, NAACIE, CCWU, GMWU, UGWU, GHRA, and GBA on the Constitutional Amendment Bill February 3,1988.



# Chapter 7

## Resistance Amidst Repression

During the period of the legal challenge against the withdrawal of increments, several anti-workers' measures were introduced. As we have seen in the previous chapter, there was the effective blocking of negotiations to the level of wage increases announced by the government. The result was that the standard of living of workers declined considerably year after year. By the end of 1981 the economic decline had reached a catastrophic level. Essential imported food items, for which there were inadequate or no local substitutes, were banned and the prices of available food items had increased way beyond the purchasing power of the workers.

Following the presentation of the 1981 Budget, an Economic Committee was established by the TUC to investigate the impact of the budget on the workers and to report thereon. On March 25, 1981, the Committee reported that real wages had progressively declined over the period of the late 1970s:

that the real value of the \$200 per month in January, 1977 was \$120.77 as calculated from the C.P.I. (1978= 100) while its value at September 1980 was \$102.07... The decline in real wages increased progressively from a salary of \$976.35 per month maximising at 34.47% (TUC Report 1981:7).

This situation was further compounded on June 1, when the national budget was reviewed and new measures were introduced which caused consumer prices to rise sharply. Based on a proposal initiated by members of the four unions, the delegates at a General Council Meeting of the TUC on June 21, 1981, unanimously agreed to make strong representations to the government for an interim increase in wages of 25 per cent. The Executive Council disregarded that decision and agreed with the government an interim relief of twelve and a half per cent, effective from July 1, 1981. This eventually became the only wage increase the workers secured until January of 1984.

Workers' representatives claimed that the TUC sided with the government and abandoned the workers struggle for a decent living wage. The TUC also readily agreed to the government's own admission that the country was bankrupt and failed to make an effort to secure the target set by the General Council. However, at the General Council meeting on March 28th 1982, the TUC General Secretary pointed out that the dominant consideration which persuaded that body to move away from the 25 per cent interim relief and settle for half the amount was to avoid the retrenchment of thousands of public sector workers (TUC Report 1982). During the course of the negotiations the government had warned the TUC that if its demand, estimated at \$127.6 million, was not reduced then substantial retrenchment of about 17000 workers or 17.9 percent of public sector employment would take place:

The TUC quite reluctantly accepted what the Vice President, Economic Planning and Finance said was the final amounts of increases which were within the financial capabilities of the government to pay without having to effect retrenchments (TUC Report March 1982).

When the TUC and Government had agreed to the wage increases in 1981, assurances came from the government in August 1981 and again in January 1982, that there would be no retrenchment. These statements by the government once again proved empty. On February 6, 1982 the Executive President announced that there would be retrenchment in the public sector. Simultaneously, the Guyana Rice Board, without any discussion with the recognised union or the TUC, retrenched over 1000 workers (NAACIE Report 1982). The government had previously rejected charges from opposition quarters and even from the four unions that the economy was in shambles. The four unions drew to the attention of the TUC the poor state of the economy and offered some solutions to the problems plaguing the country. One of the main areas of concern was the mismanagement of the economy, but no initiative was taken by the government to correct or address any of the criticisms made by the four unions. The TUC could also be blamed for not taking a tough position with the government on issues affecting workers. They instead went along with the approach of the government.

## **Economic Collapse**

Writing in the Caribbean Contact of January 1982, the economist Clive Thomas, who was also the head of the UGWU, stated that there was a collapse in the Guyana economy. This analysis invoked the wrath of top PNC officials. One month later the ruling party and government decided to "tell it as it is", which prompted the following statement from Pollydore:

When unfolding events give substance to rumours or statements previously denied, or followed belatedly by explanations or clarifications which do not basically alter the original version, there develops the tendency for credence to be given to every rumour concerned with sensitive or topical issues (TUC Report September 1982:1).

It is clear from this statement and the attitude of the TUC Executive members that the positions put forward by so-called 'opposition elements' had been put aside for the more "accurate" position of the government. Hence, the open admission of the Government shook the confidence the TUC had in it.

The government also persuaded the TUC to become involved in discussions on the criteria for retrenchment. The body for organised labour became mute and failed the workers on every government initiative. While discussions were taking place between the Government and the TUC, workers in several government departments were retrenched, without notice or regard for industrial relations practices. The 'four union movement' was vocal and held public meetings, as well as making press releases calling on the TUC to reject the government argument that retrenchment was a basis for the solution to the ills confronting the nation. The four unions also had a resolution passed at the General Council meeting in March 1982 calling on the government to halt retrenchment, and to restore the status quo by rescinding all letters which terminated the services of workers. The government did not accede to the TUC's representation as directed by the General Council. However, the General Council did not approve a proposal by the four unions for industrial action as a means of seeking to block the decisions of the government.

A union official explained that, if the TUC had taken the information which was supplied by the four unions and had represented those issues to government with the seriousness they deserved, the workers would not have been placed in such a predicament. The TUC could have blamed the government squarely for wrecking the economy. The workers who were already earning at subsistence level should not have been exposed to losing their jobs and worse yet, without any notice whatsoever. If retrenchment was imperative the government could have started the exercise from the top, by retrenching some of the seven Vice Presidents and the more than thirty Ministers, ten Regional Chairmen and their Deputies and the countless number of party functionaries who were paid from the national treasury. The salaries to party functionaries placed a tremendous burden on a small country with a population of less than three quarter of a million. The barbarity with which the government handled the matter was confirmed later by Pollydore when he wrote:

The widespread dissatisfaction which developed among workers even among some of those who were fortunate to be retained in employment, the ruthless manner in which the retrenchment itself was effected in that the termination date of employment was instantaneous in most cases, the undisguised and inexcusable favouritism shown in identifying persons for retrenchment also the total disregard manifested for fundamental industrial relations principles are already well known to all affiliates and do not require any repetition in this report except to state that the retrenchment had gone far beyond the 6,000 employees (TUC Report 1982:2)

The government had announced earlier that 6,000 workers were slated for possible retrenchment but they had surpassed that figure. Those workers who were retrenched received no severance benefits, such as redundancy payments, or pension payments. When the matter was represented by the TUC to the Secretary to the Treasury, the answer was that the "questions raised in your letter are now being given careful consideration and a reply would soon be sent to you" (1). This answer was considered in labour circles as giving the TUC the turn around since the very government official had previously authorised between one week and one month's payment to each worker - those on weekly roll received one week's pay and those who were on the monthly payroll received one month's pay - as compensation for their years of service (2). Even this parsimonious amount as compensation took several months before it

was paid to the workers.

The sugar industry, where the government in 1977 had argued that there were employment opportunities for all the strike breakers recruited during the strike, was also targeted for retrenchment. The leaders of the sugar unions were summoned to a meeting with the Corporation on May 24th 1982, where they were notified that in the light of the losses suffered by the industry over recent years, the corporation intended to take steps to remedy the situation. These included the following:

1. Employment was to be restricted to essential work which was production oriented.
2. Work related to production that could be deferred would be postponed.
3. Compassionate employment would be discontinued.
4. Guaranteed conditions would not be maintained.
5. Temporary lay offs and retrenchment would be considered.
6. "Irrelevant" customs and practices, especially those which are contrary to agreements with unions, would be ended (NAACIE Report 1982).

These proposed actions meant that all collective agreements were meaningless. In response the unions adopted a united position in rejecting any change to the existing working practices or employment levels. Nonetheless, the corporation went ahead and started their retrenchment drive at the Head Office, by severing the employment of four members of NAACIE, paying them all their benefits. Before representation was made by the union, the workers had dispatched a letter stating that they were very happy with their emoluments and did not wish to be reinstated (ibid :29). When the union insisted on fighting the issue as matter of principle, the workers maintained an adamant position and even threatened legal action against the union, since they were happy to get out of the system.

At a follow up meeting with the corporation on June 7, 1982, the sugar unions took the position that if further action was taken by the industry to retrench any other employee, firm industrial action would be taken. There were no further retrenchments, although a large number of workers were prepared to settle for severance pay, since many had plans to migrate to the United States or Canada which were popularly referred to as regions 11 and 12 (3). One union official later explained

that no amount of talking or engaging in a paper war would have blocked Guysuco's planned action. The unions had to take up a no-nonsense approach and let the employers understand that they meant business. In particular strike action would have commenced the moment another letter was issued to a worker. The official felt that if the TUC had acted in a defiant manner and given sound leadership to workers, the regime might have been forced to shelve its plan and work out a better arrangement for the workers in the other public sector agencies who were retrenched (Interview: October 1994). United action by the workers could have put a halt on the assault by government on labour. There were other solutions to the problems, he maintained, but those put forward by the four unions and opposition political parties were never vigorously pursued by the TUC. What the sugar industry did, nevertheless, was to severely restrict overtime work and reduce the working week for some 'piece rated' employees outside the harvesting gangs. These cutbacks had a disastrous impact on the industry. The neglect of cultivation resulted in poor quality cane, poor ratoon, an increase in the amount of cane needed to make sugar (an increased tons cane to tons sugar ratio) and an overall decline in production over the ensuing years.

The workers' representatives in the sugar industry were also bitter over the TUC's 'lukewarm' approach to an agreed decision by the General Council to protest against an increase of 13 percent in electricity rates for 1982. By September 1982 the Executive Council of the TUC was stripped of all its militant leaders especially those of the four unions and the mine workers union following elections at the Conference. The end of involvement of militant leaders on the Executive forced a subsequent admission by the TUC General Secretary when he wrote that:

It is illogical that the TUC could be considered as being fully representative when the GAWU with 15000 members in the sugar industry is not represented on the Executive Council and the bauxite unions only partially representative...while unions with a few hundred members are represented on the Council (TUC Report 1984:Introduction).

The PNC had taken complete control of the TUC and Minister of Labour, Kenneth Denny, was the Organising Secretary of the TUC. The Executive Council, sensing the tide of discontent among the rank and file on the increased electricity charges,

endorsed the decision of the General Council to hold a march and rally, and fixed the date of the protest for December 15, 1982. The unions affiliated to the ruling party were given clear instructions by the Executive President not to participate in any anti-government action.

Those unions then began to retreat from what was likely to be a militant confrontation and instead started to discourage their members from participating in the march and rally. The workers in the public sector were threatened by top Government Officials that those who were seen at the event would be sent home immediately. The Organising Secretary could not be found and a senior union official explained that by December 14, no physical arrangement had been put in place (Interview: October, 1994). This left General Secretary Pollydore in a vulnerable and isolated position. He had to seek the help of the four unions to ensure that there was a protest. The fears of the workers and non-participation of many unions resulted in a poor turnout of about 1500 workers. The official explained that Pollydore wanted to engage the workers in a confrontation with the government but was only going to do it when he was sure that the workers were going to respond in a united manner without fear of reprisals. The poor response to the December 15th electricity march put any such plan into disarray. Some of the representatives in the sugar industry also gained the impression that Pollydore wanted to do something, but he never would take a decisive stand on any issue. He allowed decisions to come from the unions and the sad thing was that no leadership was given to the workers at the TUC level.

## **Analysis of Food and Other Protests**

Because of the grave food shortages, the workers showed their resentment by taking intermittent protest action, despite the repressive responses by the government, often without official union sanction. Protest over the high cost of living was one of nine reasons given for most of the 585 strikes which occurred in the sugar industry in 1981. This was out of a total of 621 in the entire country (see tables 7.2 and 7.3). While 55 per cent of these stoppages were for higher wages in 1981, in 1980 the figure had been 41 per cent. Residual causes in 1981 covered 37 per cent of the

disputes compared to 41 per cent the previous year. Some of the causes within the residual group were clearly non industrial, while others were deemed to be "generally trivial and frivolous, a typical trend in the sugar industry, mainly arising over the dissatisfaction for pricing of obstacles" (Ministry of Labour Report 1981:69).

What was also significant in 1981 was the upsurge in strikes both within and beyond sugar. In 1977, apart from the strike of 135 days in the sugar industry there had been 382 other strikes. For 1978 there were 300 strikes in the country as against 219 for 1979 and 333 in 1980, bringing the strike rate average for the four years (1977-1980) to 309. This means that in 1981 there were over 312 more strike activities in the country over the average for the previous four years, an increase of just over 100 per cent. The sugar industry has always accounted for most strikes, with figures ranging from between 70 to 98 per cent of total national strikes, a continuing trend in the industry. In 1981 there was a major increase in strike incidence in both the sugar and bauxite industries. These two industries together tally 603 strikes with the other 18 coming from the other sectors of the country as the figures in table 7. 1, below indicate.

**Table 7.1**  
**Strike Statistics**

Year	Strikes		WORKERS		Work Days		Wages Lost G\$	
	198	1981	1980	1981	1980	1981	1980	1981
Sugar	276	585	3547	8410	60595	11031	1.09	2.3
Bauxit	17	18	514	2388	426	70003	.008	.150
Other	40	18	4663	1209	6601	8261	.072	.094
Total	333	621	4065	8769	67620	12558	1.17	2.544

**Source: Ministry of Labour Reports.**

This increase in strikes is of significance since throughout the year none assumed national proportion, and none was publicly organised by the unions. The spontaneous strikes involving rank and file workers reflected their strong feeling against



government industrial relations policies. Because of their brevity, the government could not have responded to them. According to some of the workers' representatives who talked to me in 1994, these actions were intended to highlight the workers' discontent over shortages and higher prices, hence the demand for higher wages. They considered their action similar to that which is displayed by the "ninja fighters - silent, but deadly" (Interview August 1994). The intensification of strike activities continued in 1982, as seen in table 7.2, when there were 32 more strikes than in 1981 at the national level, making 653, and these involved 81,564 workers at a loss of 140,744 work days and \$3.5m in wages. Again, in 1982, 639 (or 98 per cent) of the total strikes were in the sugar industry, representing an increase of 9.2 per cent over the preceding year. The number of workers involved in the sugar strikes was 80,373 with 127,987 and \$3.1m as loss of work days and wages respectively.

The figures reveal that there was a reduction in strike activities elsewhere for 1982. In the Bauxite industry there were merely 4 stoppages involving 595 workers with a loss of 9,828 work days, while in all the other sections there were 10 strikes involving 596 workers and a loss of 2,929 working days. These represent a reduction in both areas outside of sugar, by 78 per cent and 44 per cent respectively over 1981.

The strike figures for the sugar industry for 1982 are worth analysing since all the strikes were of short duration. Only twice were there strikes which affected all estates which lasted between one and two, and they were for non availability of an adequate supply of essential food and for increased wages. These strikes attracted an estimated 9,143 workers with a loss in work days of 28,616 and \$566,000 in wages. The other point to note is that 81 per cent of all strikes in the sugar industry for 1982 were for a period of one to two days, which is within the realm of the average duration of 1.8 days at the national level. With respect to workers' involvement, while there were 84,100 involved in 585 strikes in the sugar industry for 1981, there were nearly 4000 less workers involved, that is 80,373, in the 639 strikes for 1982. However, there was an increase of about 16 per cent in work days lost in 1982 (127,987) over 1981 (110,318) (Ministry of Labour Reports).

There was a significant strike, however, in the sugar industry on August 9th, at Albion Estate where 2,245 workers in all the sections of the estate's operation participated (Ministry of Labour Report:1981). In a demonstration of utter frustration, the workers took strike action over the shortage of essential foodstuff. According to representatives the workers were in a near riotous mood and some union officials feared that the government might have taken action which could have dragged their union into a battle they were not prepared for ( Interview: October 1994).

Hence, there were many approaches made to the representatives to ensure a resumption of work to allow for a more coordinated approach to the issue. The workers resumed duties after two days of protest resulting in a loss of nearly 4,000 work days and \$70,000. in wages. The representatives were bitter that they were ordered to end the strike, as it meant that the fighting mood of the workers withered away. They pointed out that it would have been a good thing if the unions had been able to put together a strategy for action against the government, since there was every indication that the regime was seriously losing its support in areas where it once claimed to have massive following, especially since the bauxite communities were in turmoil over food shortages (ibid). However, the coordination did not take place and the workers were left isolated in their struggles over the shortage of essential food.

The bauxite community, which had suffered from shortages of almost every food item, sought the support of the four unions in working on a strategy to grapple with the food crises there. Just before May Day 1983 the unions had called on the government to set up some sort of monitoring system to look at the distribution system with regard to essential food items like milk, oil, and butter especially in bauxite towns. Top government functionaries, including Prime Minister P.A. Reid, visited the area but there was no solution to the shortages.

On May 4th 1983 a meeting was convened by forty-two shop stewards of the bauxite workforce and a resolution was adopted to engage in protest demonstrations, once weekly, until the food situation was improved. The first protest took place on May 6th, and had the support of almost the entire community. That resolution was then

endorsed by both unions, the GMWU and the GBSU. A subsequent demonstration on May 18th brought women and children out on the streets. The Police and Tactical Service Unit were moved promptly onto the streets resulting in the arrests of twenty four shop stewards, two of whom were beaten and had to seek medical attention.

A former union official later explained that the detention infuriated the strikers, who continued their protest actions until midday the following day, when all those who were detained had been released (Interview: March 1995). The four unions also issued a supportive statement and held meetings with the leadership of both unions in the bauxite community. They indicated that, while they were dissatisfied over the inadequate representation at the Executive Council level, they would nevertheless give full support to the TUC in any action that body may take in seeking to ease the sufferings of the workers (ibid). The union official explained that the management, on the instructions of the government, promptly retaliated against the workers and reduced the work week from five to three days in 30 sections of the Linden operation. This led to a full scale strike which commenced on June 6, 1983 and lasted for six weeks. The strike ended as a partial victory for the workers when the management agreed to revert to the five day work week pending further discussions. It resulted in a loss of 60,152 work days and approximately \$1.5m in wages (Ministry of Labour Report 1983: 66).

While the discussions were taking place there was further retaliation by the government, resulting in the retrenchment of 1,721 union and branch officials, shop stewards and militant leaders of the workers. Outspoken GBSU President, Gordon Griffith and GMWU Treasurer, Malcolm Thompson were among those who were retrenched. This was the worst display of union persecution by the regime, against a group of workers who, until then, had shown complete loyalty and support to it. The bauxite unions were unable to respond to such a large scale assault on this section of the workforce, having just concluded a six weeks strike. To respond effectively to this action by the government they would have needed the support of the entire labour movement. The union official claimed that the unions did not anticipate such reaction by the government. The workers were lured into resuming duties, thinking that the

management were serious in addressing the issue of the reduced work week. They did not realise that the response was going to be so merciless, in which the government knocked out a major portion of the militant wing of the bauxite workforce (ibid).

The timing of the government's action has to be examined in the light of two developments during that year. First, the government made a tactical retreat in order to restore normalcy, since the sugar workers were on the edge over the shortages and it did not want to see the involvement of both sugar and bauxite workers at the same time on the same issue. Second, the workers in bauxite had already been financially crippled as a result of the six weeks strike and the government had enough information that solidarity action was very unlikely. Many of the influential shop stewards and some officers of the GMWU and GBSU were already in discussions with some of the officials of the four unions. Hence, it was an opportune moment for the Government to break up this group and place them on the defensive before any proper link was forged.

Let us examine why there was no proper coordination over the dismissals. Many of the representatives who were interviewed in sugar explained that when they were involved in protests over food shortages there was no support from any other section. While sugar workers were in a mood to strike, the representatives were often warned by their union officials not to be dragged into any prolonged strike, since the Guyanese masses were engulfed in fear and were unlikely to take on the regime in any confrontation. During the course of the bauxite strike the sugar workers wanted to join in, but were advised by their leaders to stay out since it was necessary to let the bauxite workers learn to appreciate real working class struggles (Interview: October, 1994). They were further told that the bauxite workers had been sitting on the fence for a very long time when the battle had to be waged by the sugar workers alone (ibid). It was also necessary for the racial division to be overcome and the bauxite workers had to attain that level of consciousness in their own time and through struggles. Moreover, there was no request for solidarity coming from the bauxite workers or their leaders (ibid).

Further, the representatives claimed that many union leaders had become indecisive and fearful following the government's previous assaults on workers and the assassination of renowned historian, Walter Rodney. They claimed that if the government was not made to suffer for the death of Rodney, who was very popular, then they had a licence to ride over anyone or any organisation. The use of the army and police in industrial disputes was also a factor which worried the workers. As a result, the leaders had to be cautious in launching any initiative aimed at putting pressure on the government (ibid). The government had succeeded in creating a nation of fearful and divided people. This of course was not helped by the disunity in the opposition camp.

The comments by those workers' representatives when analysed seem to reflect what transpired over the two years 1982 and 1983. As the former PNC Minister remarked, the government had infiltrated the opposition parties and unions opposed to it and knew that the sugar workers were not going to join in an immediate struggle alongside the bauxite workers (Interview: September 1994). Further, the government had advanced notice of any major strikes involving the unions and were thus able to plan their response. However, they did not anticipate the bauxite strike at that time because of its spontaneity, so they had to ensure stability before those workers could be given "a dose of Fat Boy's (President Burnham's) medicine"(ibid) .

In 1983 there was a sizeable increase in strike activities at the national level, with 731 disputes, and again the sugar industry dominated the scene with 704 strikes. Apart from the bauxite strike there were no other strikes which reached national proportions. All the strikes were by sections of the estate's operation for very short periods. For example, in 1983 there were 556 stoppages which lasted no longer than two days, and 98 which lasted for three days, compared with 1982 when 519 lasted up to two days and 81 lasted three days. There were a relatively small number which lasted over a week and involved only a small section of the workforce on the following locations. At LBI a dispute involved just 150 workers in February 1983, while 218 workers struck at Leonora in August, and 180 at Uitvlugt in October of the same year. There were just a few protest strikes over food shortages in the sugar

industry in 1983 and these took place outside the period when the bauxite workers were holding their protests. What appears clear from the analysis is that, while workers in different sections of operation may have had common problems, the workers and their unions did not address them in a unified manner.

As will be noticed from the strike tables, 1983 was the year with the highest number of strikes. There was also a steep increase of strike activities during the period 1981-1983 when the economic situation of the workers had deteriorated sharply. Although there was a drastic decline in strike activities in 1984 this had to do with the fear which had been stimulated among several sections of the workforce. In bauxite, for example, where the unions were engaged in negotiations over the entitlements of the 1,721 victimized workers, there was not a single strike for that year. Again 80 per cent of the 480 strikes in the sugar industry were for periods up to two days. The thirteen other strikes which occurred outside sugar were by a handful of workers and were again for short periods, although there was one at the Guyana National Engineering Corporation, involving 194 workers, which lasted seven days (Ministry of Labour :1984). The only union that was involved in a significant struggle in 1984 was the NAACIE, which struck over the introduction of the Labour Amendment Bill, (as discussed in the previous chapter). That union had a total of 1,109 clerical workers out on strike for 12 days, resulted in a loss of 11,917 work days and \$227,452 in wages. In fact, the former government Minister explained that in the short term it seemed as if the government succeeded in quelling the tide of discontent which was rapidly spreading across the country. It was not until 1986 that significant new struggles emerged in the sugar industry.

### **Rationalisation Process**

At the beginning of 1986 the sugar industry had taken a decision to rationalise its operation. It held a meeting with the unions on March 5, 1986 informing them that it was going to reduce the acreage under cultivation from 120,000 to 95,000 acres with an anticipated production of 250,000 tons of sugar (ibid:33). Further, two sugar factories, Leonora on the West Coast of Demerara, and another in the Demerara

triangle (later identified as Diamond on the East Bank of Demerara) would be closed. The reduction in acreage did not mean that the industry would give up the land which would be taken out of production, but it would use it for other activities which were already in process. In reducing the acreage under cultivation it was mentioned that the remainder would be properly taken care of in terms of husbandry practice to ensure maximum yields were obtained. Emphasis would be put on upgrading the dairy farms at Rose Hall and Uitvlugt and re-establishing the one at Bel Air on the East Coast. The production of fish, rice, and cash crops would be increased. In addition, the industry would escalate its examination of other uses of its by-products. The exercise would not result in the retrenchment of workers but some displacement of factory hands would be necessary (ibid).

These decisions were opposed by union officials, who mentioned that the Diamond factory had just installed a new cane hoist costing millions of dollars and supplied molasses for the rum distillery based at that location, so that in their view it was a bad decision to close it. The factory had more grinding capacity than any other, excepting Albion, and was voted the champion factory in 1985. It was argued that any such decision should take into account the cost of moving cane from Diamond to LBI for grinding, coupled with the increased expenditure for the maintenance of roads and waterways. The decline in the sucrose contents of the sugar cane due to the longer time taken for transportation to the factory should also be given consideration. The Leonora factory, it was pointed out, was more fuel efficient than the neighbouring Uitvlugt factory and produced the best quality of local sales sugar. The cane transportation for the longer distances would result in additional expenditure on tractors and other vehicles, fuel and maintenance costs. A NAACIE official was also of the view that the other crops division should have been made to account separately for its operation, since it was clear that growing other crops was at the expense of the sugar industry (Interview: October 1994).

Additionally, the union leaders were concerned with the manner in which the disclosure was made. It was after the Minister of Finance had presented his national budget and announced these changes that Guysuco invited the Unions to inform them

of the decisions. Notwithstanding the protestations by the unions over the lack of adequate consultation, the industry went ahead to implement the changes. With the closure of the Leonora factory at the end of the second crop in 1986, 223 workers had to be transferred to new jobs and by the end of the year only seven workers were left to be given alternative work. No one was made redundant (Guysuco Report 1986:9). The then Corporation Chairman, Harold Davis, later deemed as “rubbish” criticisms by persons who attacked the decisions to close the factories, and asserted that "we plan still to produce sugar to the level of 250,000 tons which will meet all of our marketing demands and will have some sugar to take hold of any bonanza in the world market" (Stabroek News, 22-10-87). A union leader who was later asked to comment on the chairman's statement said that his words had not matched reality and that the leadership he offered the industry was the worst possible. The industry under his stewardship went further into decline following the change, instead of advancing towards the target of 250,000 tons (Interview: October 1994).

The union leader's concern that the longer haulage of cane could seriously affect the juice quality seemed to have been confirmed. Although the cane had to be transported the usual journey, the "corporation's objective of having 90% canes harvested and milled within 48 hours after burning was not achieved by any location in 1986, and undoubtedly had an adverse effect on juice quality" (ibid: 6). This failure resulted in an increase in the tons cane to tons sugar ratio (tc:ts), to about 10 per cent more than what was projected. If this had not occurred, production would have resulted in an increase of about 20,000 tons of sugar for that year. Letters by the unions to the Ministers of Labour and Agriculture and to Guysuco calling for a public enquiry into the operation of the sugar industry were not addressed seriously, and as the time was fast approaching for the closure of the Diamond factory the unions decided to mount a strike and protest march (NAACIE Report, 1988: 10).

As a consequence, strike action was taken based on calls by both NAACIE and GAWU on the 19th March, 1987. The workers staged a march from Diamond to the Independence Park in George Town, where a public meeting was held. They covered a distance of about 10 miles and received support from residents in the communities



who came out of their houses and waved and offered refreshments to the protesters throughout the march. The closure nonetheless took place, and all the affected workers were transferred to LBI and Wales (NAACIE Report 1988: 10). The suggestion by a union official that there should be a takeover of the Diamond factory by the workers, as was done by workers at the Upper Clyde Shipyard in Scotland (Foster and Woolfson 1986), was not entertained because of fears of the regime. The union officials and representatives remained convinced that the closures of the factories and the pumping of vast sums of money into 'other crops' were not timely and were ill conceived.

Their position was justified from the stand point of what transpired three years later. The new management team from Booker Tate, which contracted to run the industry in 1990, de-emphasised the other crops and is concentrating its energy only on the production of sugar. Sugar output had drastically declined from a position of 245,440 tons in 1986 to 220,995 tons in 1987 and to the lowest position in living memory, 129,920 tons, in 1990. Under the Booker Tate management the industry's production by the end of 1992 almost doubled the 1990 figure. The rice complex at Blairmont, along with over 1,600 acres of land, was put up for sale in 1991 and was purchased by rice magnate Kayman Sankar in 1992 at a cost of US\$3.5m, with the stock on hand yielding an additional G\$16m (Guysuco Report 1992:10). Such developments in sugar were not, however, separate from broader pressures and changes in the economy. In particular, the second half of the 1980s was characterised by international pressures for restructuring, especially from the IMF, and these two had repercussions for workers, unions and industrial relations.

### **IMF Medicine At Work**

By 1986 the IMF team had been in constant negotiations with the government and on January 16th 1987 the government devalued the currency by 127%, so the exchange rate fell from G\$4.40 to G\$10.00 per US\$1.00. Further, the US dollar was allowed to float on the parallel market and soon the rate reached G\$40. per US\$1. Pollydore argued that the devaluation had compounded the economic and social problems in

which life had become increasingly difficult for workers over the last ten years. He further stated that the rising prices resulted in increases in the cost of living far beyond the increases agreed upon between the TUC and the Government (TUC Report 1987: 10).

Although the devaluation resulted in acute wage difficulties for workers, the industrial scene was relatively calm with only one major dispute occurring at Albion. On August 3, about 4,377 workers went on strike over the non availability of sugar in that community, resulting in a loss of 13,119 work days and \$461,000. in wages. It is ironic that the workers in the largest sugar producing community were unable to obtain what they were producing. This became a major problem for the country as a whole in the ensuing years, since the corporation was unable to meet its overseas commitment because of the drastic decline in production. The government and Guysuco had to take the very unpopular decision to import, for the first time in the country's history, what workers considered to be substandard quality sugar to meet the requirement for local consumption.

The TUC was also divided over the government's policies, with the militant wing calling for involvement in the negotiations with the IMF and at the same time urging the government to reverse some of the decisions taken. Those unions which were affiliated to the ruling party were fully supportive of the so-called structural adjustment programme. When the IMF team visited Guyana in March and April 1987 to sign an agreement with the government, it was greeted by pickets from the leadership of the TUC, protesting the harsh conditions implied by the agreement. According to one leading union official, the exercise, staged from March 27th, to April 2nd, was intended to highlight that the IMF prescriptions meant more devaluation, lower wages, more taxation, more exploitation, starvation, malnutrition, poverty, crime and death. They were urging the government to put the people before the debt, warning that the IMF did not have a successful record and that their policies have often led to riots, demonstrations, death and destruction in a number of countries including neighbouring Venezuela.

The picketing exercise was promptly condemned by leaders of the unions affiliated to the ruling party, who called for disciplinary action to be taken against the leaders involved in the exercise because they had not first sought the approval of the Executive Council (TUC Report 1987). When the vote was taken at the Executive Council meeting on April 8, the militants survived by one vote. If the motion of the dissidents had succeeded then President Daniels, Vice President Chand, General Secretary Pollydore, the Treasurer, Gopaul, and all the other participating members of the Executive Council might have been removed at the same time. The government supporters on the TUC Executive were advised by Pollydore that their action:

was in sharp contrast with protest action by trade unions everywhere, and even by governments of certain developed countries concerning the serious economic sufferings of workers....Trade Unions in Guyana must join with their comrades everywhere and seize every opportunity open to them to protest those harsh IMF prescriptions which are making life increasingly difficult for the workers (ibid:6).

The ruling party, through the action of its affiliated union leaders, had sent a clear signal that it was not going to tolerate opposition at the level of the TUC. It feared that the TUC could begin to assert its independence, and as a consequence every effort was made thereafter to take control of that body. Hence, the serious division which took place in the midst of the September 1988 TUC Conference, resulting in the split and the formation of FITUG. The Government/ IMF negotiations and the serious decline in the living standards of the workers had been the subject of much debate prior to, during and after the conference. Both GAWU and NAACIE submitted motions calling on the TUC to oppose the IMF talks. NAACIE argued that the devaluation of 127% was having a negative impact on the economy and the working class, while the GAWU urged the government to find an alternative arrangement which will "serve national development, stimulate production, and enhance the interest of the working class...and to safeguard the interest of Guyanese from the serious and adverse consequences of foreign debt charges and its accumulation" (Chronicle, 28th September 1988). The GLU, on the other hand, called on delegates "to congratulate the government on the initiative taken to improve the economy and had pledged its support and solidarity" (ibid).

The opposition leader, in his capacity as a delegate of GAWU, launched a fierce attack on the negotiations taking place between the Government and the IMF at the TUC conference. He "rejected assertions by the President that the IMF was the only alternative to take Guyana out of the present crisis ... and pointed to a political solution as an alternative" (Mirror, September 25th 1988). Dr. Jagan mentioned that for a political solution to succeed there must be "the democratisation of the society, a broad based government, suspension of debt payments and reduction of expenditures on the military and government bureaucracies"(ibid) and he emphasised that wherever IMF conditions had been imposed, grave consequences followed, resulting in riots as in the case of Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and other Latin American countries. The President of Guyana, Desmond Hoyte, who opened the 1988 TUC conference, had promised that greater benefits would flow as a result of the arrangement with the IMF and that there would be no retrenchment, no wage freeze, no devaluation in the imminent future, and that price control would be retained over only a few essential items. The assurances were welcomed by George Daniels, the outgoing President of the TUC. However, they proved to be empty promises.

As the situation of the workers deteriorated, the opposition PPP held a series of meetings throughout the country to condemn the government's economic programme. Simultaneously, the government announced that there were three acts of arson committed on several acres of sugar cane and a bridge in the sugar industry and retaliated by breaking off talks on electoral reforms which had been taking place between the PPP and PNC. These talks had started after months of appeals through letters by the PPP to the PNC, and the cessation was seen as a penalty imposed on the PPP in order to get that party to back away from the initiative to take the issues concerning the IMF to the people. The government's position was that the PPP was fermenting disorder, promoting racism, maligning Guyana abroad and inviting foreigners to meddle into the internal affairs of the country (Chronicle October 23rd 1988) and that for the talks to continue there must be a halt to those activities. The PPP, which was accused of making inflammatory statements and engaging in criminal behaviour had therefore to give "evidence that it is prepared to conduct itself properly" (Stabroek News October 22,1988). The Ministry of Information charged the

opposition party with mounting a campaign of agitation against the government's firm decision to enter into an arrangement with the IMF, and that after that party failed to incite popular support it was using its industrial arm, the GAWU, to disrupt economic activities (ibid).

The workers' representatives claimed that the government was merely appealing for sympathy in view of the worsening conditions in the country. Further, it was the government who orchestrated the burning of sugar canes, since the canes were ripe and were no loss to the industry. The action was intended to appeal to the sentiments of their supporters who were showing signs of open rejection of the government policies. Dr. Jagan also claimed that the government statement "was based on hysteria. I am not an arsonist. I don't believe in arson... We don't malign Guyana, we give the facts" (ibid). While these charges and counter charges were taking place between the two main political parties in the country, the union grouping FITUG started a series of public meetings to test the mood of the workers and to prepare them for action against the economic policies of the government.

At several meetings, FITUG took the opportunity to defend GAWU against unsubstantiated charges by the government. The labour leaders, for the first time in about a quarter of a century, were concentrating their efforts on national issues outside their bargaining units. As one official later remarked, bauxite and public service leaders were for the first time speaking their minds in the sugar industry and elsewhere and the sugar representatives were cheered by bauxite workers as they highlighted the need for forging real working class unity (Interview: November 1994). The police also joined the fray saying that they had evidence to link GAWU with the arson in the sugar industry (Stabroek News October 28th 1988), while the sugar corporation was less emphatic by stating that agents were afoot to destroy the gains made. They mentioned that there were also six acres of young canes ranging from 34 to 10 weeks which were burnt at Enterprise, representing a loss to the corporation (Chronicle October 28th 1988). President Hoyte, while not naming anyone, denounced arson and sabotage which he said will not be tolerated and "declared that nothing or no one would prevent the Government entering a Fund

agreement"(ibid). Hoyte was speaking at the opening of the GLU Annual Conference at which the Union's President, Samuel Walker, praised the relationship between the TUC and Government, which he claimed was better than ever before and pointed out that the GLU, as the oldest union, would continue to give advice to workers (ibid).

Despite the statement from the police, no one was charged and this prompted Eusi Kwayana of the WPA to call on the authorities to lay charges if there were evidence. He remarked that he could not rule out the possibility that the canes were burnt by the PNC. "We know this Government too well. If they have the evidence they say they have, they would certainly prosecute" (Stabroek News October 29th 1988). Meanwhile the DLM accused the government of attempting to convert the PPP into the principal cause for the collapse of the economy (ibid). The GAWU, in disputing the accusations, claimed that it was the intention of the authorities to undermine the solidarity of the working class and asserted:

The media, Guysuco, and the government are yet to inform the public that GAWU shop stewards and activists without hesitation, and in the 'wee hours' of the morning of October 14 at great risk to themselves and their families, who were left unprotected, went to the rescue of Enmore management and successfully put out the fire at Good Hope... and avoided the possibilities of greater damage to Guysuco's property...after the fire GAWU shop stewards were left to protect the cane fields, which clearly is an expression of managements confidence and an exoneration of them from any guilt (ibid).

While FITUG has been conducting its campaign among workers with significant success, the TUC has been pleading with the government to allow it to be involved in the discussions with the IMF in order that the views of the workers on the recovery programme could be made known. This request went unheeded, and with the implementation of the Government /IMF recovery programme, FITUG, having analysed the situation in the country, announced that it was an appropriate time to call a limited protest strike.

### **The FITUG Day of Protest**

FITUG, in announcing the day of protest for February 24th 1989, urged all Guyanese

workers to stay home on that day (4). In justifying its action FITUG felt that the welfare of the workers had been seriously jeopardised by unions whose legitimacy could be questioned and who were acting as instruments of the ruling party. As a result, a situation had been created in which there has been a constant decline in the living standards of the workers:

The sad situation has resulted in the real wages of the worker declining by 36% between 1977-1987 and by 45% between January, 1987-1989 September. A decline of 64% since 1977...that the living standards of the workers have been seriously eroded by a rapacious tax system that is not only outdated, but designed to perpetuate poverty at all levels of the wage and salary earning class. Of interest also, is the increase of 116% in the food index between January 1987 and September 1988...the time has come for the worker of our country, organised in our several trade unions to record their protest over the serious decline in their living standards and the erosion of their rights, and that of their union... FITUG therefore call for a day of protest...and call for all workers to down tool, stay home from work, or attend their place of worship, and pray for the assistance of the Almighty in ending the suffering of our people (5).

During the course of FITUG's successful meetings throughout the country, Mike McCormack, a human rights advocate, sounded a note of caution when he wrote:

the seven unions need to carefully assess, rather than take for granted, the level of active support they can expect from among a demoralised population .... Demoralisation has provoked a thousand ways of insulating ourselves from the problems by isolating ourselves from each other... We have grown accustomed to the idea that the powers that be are all powerful, that our every word of protest is noted down for future reprisals, that they are in complete control. In other words, we have a slave psychology (Catholic Standard, 9-10-88).

He further pointed out that the churches, political parties and unions had been unable to convert the widespread disillusionment into the indignation required in order to effect a change, because of pessimism and the individualistic and passive response over changing the political system. There was considerable evidence in support of McCormack's analysis, and again he warned: "we all make silent declarations of loyalty each time any of us avoids speaking our minds in public because we are not sure who may be listening. We silently pledge loyalty each time we socialise with

representatives of this intolerant system” (ibid 23-10-88-). Only during the Rodney era was there optimism that change would come and people had shown that they were prepared to stand up and demand that change. However, many union leaders were passive and Rodney did not benefit from the situation as in 1988, where union leaders in crucial sectors were standing up. Apart from the sugar industry, other union leaders in the Rodney era were not ready for a struggle. As a NAACIE Official remarked, if Rodney had had the support of trade union leaders during his period of struggles the situation was likely to have been different in the country during the 1980s.

The situation in 1989 was therefore more favourable for a confrontation. FITUG saw that there was a vacuum which had to be addressed. One of its official, reflecting on this experience, pointed out that some organisation had to take the chance to create that cohesive force. After reflection and appeals by the hardened union leaders, the entire group agreed that workers should be allowed the opportunity to benefit at least once from decisive leadership. The day of protest was to be an occasion for testing the waters to see if the workers were ripe for a massive struggle. The union leaders, conscious of likely reprisals from the government, had taken the decision that if any worker was victimized the entire grouping would feel aggrieved and give solidarity to that worker. FITUG it was felt was therefore “battle ready” (Interview: March 1995).

In an appeal to the workers at the first meeting in the capital city, FITUG President Daniels called on the workers to give themselves a chance by taking a course which could ensure hope to this once prosperous country, while Vice President Todd argued that the mess in the country could only be remedied through fair and free elections (Mirror, January 22nd 1989). Daniels further argued that a trade union organisation had to let its strength and power be felt and posited: "Over the years we have not been using that power and they have used political and state power against us whenever we attempt to speak out" (Stabroek News, January 21st 1989). Other leaders from the miners' union also urged the workers to force the government to change course and appealed to them to demonstrate their dissatisfaction against what was taking place. A NAACIE Official warned that political sanctions by the government must ensure an equal political response from the workers. There was also tacit support for FITUG's



planned action from the two most influential church leaders in the country. The Anglican Bishop, Randolph George and Catholic Bishop, Benedict Singh in a joint statement called on the Guyanese to observe February 24th, as a protest against the extreme pain and sacrifices that the people were going through. The Bishops stated:

Such action from a group of responsible Guyanese forces us to note that our problems are not fundamentally economic, but have to do with relationships.... We will persist until we cause justice to triumph (Catholic Standard February 26th 1989).

The GBA issued a call to their members to stay away from Court as a demonstration of solidarity. There was, therefore, widespread support for the planned action. Unfortunately, two days before the protest, despite the united call and public condemnation of the existing conditions by all the unions, the CCWU leaders lost their nerve and announced that February 24th was not a convenient day for their union's participation in the action. The PSU leadership also changed track and decided not to call out their members. Thus, the day of protest was thrown into confusion and only sugar and bauxite workers responded almost in their entirety to the call.

Union officials who were interviewed later pointed out that there was reasonable support from some lawyers, taxi drivers and teachers. However, the failure by both the CCWU and PSU to stand by a unanimous decision of all the unions merely confirmed the degree of indecisiveness among union leaders, and this contributed to the poor showing of solidarity in the capital city, Georgetown. (Paradoxically there was more support in the city from teachers whose union was not part of the FITUG call). It would also appear that since the dismissal of CCWU members in 1979, that union became very fearful in calling strikes against the regime. As one prominent journalist reported:

The CCWU, one of the seven, pulled out at a late stage, effectively crippling any impact the protest call would have had on the city's main commercial stores. CCWU President Mr. Gordon Todd had, on two public meetings in the city to build support for the day of protest, thrown his weight behind the call. The union's withdrawal... now casts questions over its further FITUG tenancy

and top alliance sources were yesterday puzzled at the CCWU's position (Stabroek News February 25th 1989).

Business officials explained that they were inclined to join the protest by closing their businesses following the Bishops' appeal, but the lack of unity at FITUG level caused them to change their minds. They were scared of the government's reprisals and were convinced that they would not have had much support from the unions. They claimed that they would have supported any action aimed at putting things right in the country, provided that support was obtained from all the other interest groups in the country. A leading union representative in the sugar industry remarked later that the disunity at the leadership level would always pose problems for the working class, and that unions will have to put their act together if their views were going to be taken seriously by workers (Interview: November 1994). Following the protest action the government began victimizing teachers. Some on the West Demerara were transferred, and when they refused to go they were charged with trespass for staying at the school at which they were teaching prior to the day of protest. The "ring leaders" were identified and dismissed and they received no support from FITUG. Leaders from GAWU and NAACIE in a limited way gave them whatever advice and support they needed (NAACIE Report: 1990).

There was also reprisal action against the Bauxite Unions when, on February 27th, the management of Guymine informed them that the officers involved in the calling of the strike would no longer be accorded official recognition as bargaining agents for bauxite workers. Warning letters were issued to some bauxite workers and the deduction of union dues to both unions was halted. FITUG was slow to react to these acts of victimization, and while the GMWU and GBSU issued the management with a seven days ultimatum to commence talks on the decisions taken by them, it was the workers who took the initiative. NAACIE had called on FITUG to show solidarity with the teachers by calling a general strike to put a halt to any further action by the government, but the leaders in the other unions wanted time to study the next move (NAACIE Report 1990:45). Some shop stewards decided that they were not going to sit idly by while management was taking their time to arrange meetings with their unions. Hence, on March 3, they instructed all the workers in the mining industry to

take industrial action.

Immediately thereafter FITUG called on the individual unions to write to their respective employers giving them seventy two hours notice of industrial action if the situation in the bauxite industry was not restored to normalcy. The decision was again taken by leaders of all the unions, and yet again there was a failure by these leaders to act in unison. The GPSU and CCWU did not issue any notice to the employers with whom they had bargaining rights, while the GAWU varied the decision by calling out their members on a protest strike for one day without consulting or notifying the other unions. The NAACIE and UGWU, which had complied with the decision of FITUG, were instructed not to take any action since talks had started between the Bauxite Unions and Company officials the day before the expiration of the strike notice.

The Guysuco had warned NAACIE that it had taken a serious view of the planned disruption in the sugar industry and "holds itself free to take such action as it considers necessary to protect the well being of the industry and those who work in it" (Chronicle, March 8th 1989). The Bauxite workers waged the struggle alone, and when there was no progress in the talks between bauxite unions and the company FITUG decided to mount pickets in front of the Company offices in Georgetown.

The Bauxite workers had travelled some sixty five miles to the capital city and were joined by leaders from the GAWU, NAACIE and UGWU on March 17, 1989. There was a picketing demonstration in front of the company's head office on Main Street. The situation was tense and confrontation between the workers and government officials seemed imminent. The peace of the capital city was disrupted by the loud chants of the workers. The bauxite representatives claimed that this was the method used by the PNC in the early 1960s to destabilize the PPP administration and they were going to reverse the situation for the PNC. In response, the government restored the status quo with the miners' unions before the day's protest was over. The bauxite workers left the city with a feeling of satisfaction that their sacrifices had forced the government to retreat from its position of de-recognition to one of seeking dialogue. There was also an open admission by company officials that the day of protest had

gravely disrupted production in the bauxite industry. These types of revelations were not the usual acts by the “oppressive regime”, which always had the tendency to report that workers have been unresponsive to strike calls.

## **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is clear that the workers’ militant action in the 1980s was precipitated by the government’s wage restraint policy. This took place during a period of serious economic decline in the country. What was significant also was the increased vibrancy among the shop stewards and rank and file in the bauxite industry. In an attempt to curb the fighting spirit of the workers, the government resorted to taking repressive measures. But the workers found ways of continuing their protests, albeit for shorter durations. The vast increase in strike activities in the years 1981, 1982, 1983, and 1985 were the result of rank and file action. It is evident that the union leaders were merely responding to workers’ militancy, while there was hardly any coordination among the unions. It was not until the impasse at the 1988 TUC elections, and the establishment of FITUG, that a serious attempt was made to launch a coordinated protest action, the first of its kind since 1979. But again, like in 1979, some union leaders broke ranks and solidarity.

This was done in the wake of widespread public sympathy and support. 1988 was the first time since the PNC took office that so many organisations representing a wide cross section of the community had openly stated their opposition to the government’s policies. The opportunity which presented itself for an alliance of trade unions, church and professional bodies disappeared by the failure of the unions within the FITUG grouping to act in unison. The government meanwhile, benefitted from the apparent division in the union movement, and it was able to pursue its anti-working class measures based on IMF policies, especially on wages and jobs, because these have not been effectively challenged. However, one favourable feature that developed during the period was the continued determination of the rank and file in both the sugar and bauxite industries to struggle against a well organised state machinery.

**Endnotes:-**

1. The TUC had sent a letter to the Secretary to the Treasury dated March 14, 1982 while the reply from the Secretary to the Treasury to the TUC was sent on May 18, 1982.
2. The circular # 8/1982 was sent by the Secretary to the Treasury, who, authorised the payments.
3. Guyana is divided into 10 Regions. However, because of the heavy rate of migration to the USA and Canada by Guyanese, these two countries have often been referred to as Regions 11 and 12 respectively.
4. FITUG Press Statement signed by leaders of the seven Unions dated Thursday February 9, 1989.
5. Ibid

**Table 7. 2: National Strike Statistics 1969- 1994**

YEAR	No. of Strikes	WORKERS Involved	Work Days Lost	WAGES LOST G\$	Av.Duration Days
1969	126	17878	38,660	250,000.	1.9
1970	159	84056	453,928	2,800,000.	2.1
1971	199	41447	141,816	623,529.	2.0
1972	139	32142	81,646	511,791.	1.9
1973	172	34692	75,955	666,676.	1.8
1974	136	61932	150,991	1,300,191.	1.9
1975	467	245199	1,074,761	10,119,456.	1.7
1976	400	82142	229,480	2,523,379.	2.2
1977	383	89687	964,282	10,242,111.	2.5
1978	300	52060	75,791	955,146.	.2
1979	219	106366	324,473	6,387,732.	4.9
1980	333	40652	67,620	1,167,170.	1.7
1981	621	87697	125,582	2,552,199.	2.1
1982	653	81564	140,744	3,346,872.	1.8
1983	731	103519	220,295	5,142,657.	1.9
1984	493	60300	152,000	3,361,082.	2.1
1985	718	93718	209,083	4,363,656.	1.9
1986	453	47550	138,364	2,944,410.	1.8
1987	497	57757	131,449	3,823,721.	1.8
1988	349	39558	232,595	8,104,689.	2.5
1989	138	113320	686,356	35,877,077.	2.6
1990	329	61474	244,498	16,856,210.	2.1
1991	307	98440	110,871	21,510,203.	1.6
1992	258	69254	126,747	114653,627.	1.9
1993	473	53455	129,344	79,918,656.	1.8
1994	468	N/A	90,138	61,626,569	N/A

**Source: Ministry of Labour Records.**

**Table 7. 3: Summary of Strikes In The Sugar Industry 1977-1994**

YEAR	NO OF STRIKES	WORKERS INVOLVED	Work Days Lost	WAGES LOST G\$
1977	N/A	N/A	1,500,000	15,600,000.
1978	241	48,215	72,875	952,282.
1979	158	91,463	139,091	2,786,201.
1980	276	35,475	60,593	1,087,767.
1981	585	84,100	110,318	2,279,129.
1982	639	80,373	127,987	3,127,186.
1983	709	94,818	164,308	2,989,335.
1984	480	58,789	144,157	3,297,965.
1985	N/A	N/A	173,970	3,160,000.
1986	447	46,957	135,109	2,886,904.
1987	489	57,052	128,986	3,752,639.
1988	N/A	N/A	255,471	9,200,000.
1989	134	107,875	594,339	29,309,218.
1990	315	60,905	229,291	16,856,210.
1991	297	98,440	110,871	21,510,203.
1992	237	68,683	126,059	114,654,627.
1993	448	53,330	126,344	75,231,156.
1994	446	N/A	71,986	48,804,508.

**Sources: Ministry of Labour Records.  
Guysuco Reports.**

**Table 7. 4: Strikes in the Bauxite Industry**

YEAR	NO, OF	WORKERS	Work Days	WAGES LOST
1977	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1978	6	52	128	1,316.
1979	15	9562	173,449	3,540,935.
1980	17	514	426	7,858.
1981	18	2388	7,003	149,025.
1982	4	595	9,828	167,974.
1983	12	5388	94,883	2,079,715.
1984	-	-	-	-
1985	-	-	-	-
1986	1	212	212	9,721.
1987	2	69	88	5,175.
1988	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1989	2	4437	90,001	6,567,859.
1990	1	124	62	18,540.
1991	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1992	1	N/A	N/A	N/A
1993	2	N/A	N/A	N/A
1994*	6	N/A	5,275	7,469,350

**Source: Ministry of Labour Records.**

**\*includes mining and quarry.**



**Table 7.5: Sugar Production Records: 1948 - 1975**

Year	Acres Reaped	Tons Cane Reaped (000)	T.C.A	TC.TS	T.S.A	Tons Sugar Produced
1948	54,609	1,531.2	28.04	8.85	3.16	172,991
1949	55,754	2,011.6	36.08	11.55	3.12	174,227
1950	64,718	2,162.8	33.41	11.05	3.02	195,651
1951	66,897	2,453.6	36.68	11.29	3.24	217,306
1952	72,538	2,672.4	36.84	11.01	3.34	242,692
1953	71,241	2,756.3	38.69	11.48	3.37	240,176
1954	78,044	2,745.7	35.18	11.49	3.06	238,922
1955	73,886	2,713.2	36.72	10.84	3.38	250,111
1956	74,028	2,788.3	37.66	10.78	3.49	263,333
1957	81,339	2,901.1	37.60	10.75	3.44	284,973
1958	84,788	3,406.1	42.30	10.93	3.93	306,361
1959	87,658	3,167.5	38.10	11.77	3.40	284,425
1960	96,248	3,677.4	40.10	11.37	3.55	334,441
1961	105,821	3,507.3	34.80	11.58	3.07	324,745
1962	98,455	3,381.7	36.00	10.75	3.45	326,023
1963	95,076	3,352.3	36.00	10.75	3.53	317,137
1964	93,089	2,936.5	33.11	12.00	2.85	258,378
1965	103,085	3,297.1	33.50	10.96	3.15	309,445
1966	99,059	3,183.8	33.70	12.10	2.89	288,869
1967	102,900	3,758.7	36.53	10.94	3.34	343,922
1968	107,392	3,502.	32.61	11.05	2.95	316,848
1969	125,962	4,112.3	32.64	11.28	2.89	364,465
1970	107,126	3,712.0	34.65	11.93	2.90	311,149
1971	136,529	4,244.9	31.09	11.51	2.70	368,843
1972	129,500	3,595.7	27.77	11.43	2.43	314,600
1973	101,709	3,270.1	29.30	12.31	2.35	265,704
1974	120,800	4,099.	30.10	11.92	2.52	340,815
1975	91,408	3,070.7	33.60	11.53	2.92	300,350

Sources: Extracted from various sugar reports.

**Table 7. 6: Sugar Production Records 1976-1994**

Year	Acres Reaped	Tons Cane Milled ('000)	T.C.A.	TC/TS	T.S.A	Tons Sugar Produced
1976	114,580	3,688	31.60	12.17	2.60	332,457
1977	108,304	3,108	28.70	12.87	2.23	241,527
1978	137,481	4,218	30.68	12.99	2.36	324,805
1979	134,030	3,892	29.02	13.05	2.23	298,268
1980	123,143	3,601	29.24	13.35	2.19	269,634
1981	136,213	4,125	30.28	13.71	2.31	300,790
1982	129,609	3,845	29.67	13.36	2.22	287,725
1983	119,429	3,571	29.90	14.18	2.11	251,870
1984	125,926	3,469	27.54	14.34	1.92	241,861
1985	107,526	3,218	29.93	13.24	2.26	243,000
1986	112,875	3,348	29.66	13.64	2.17	245,440
1987	106,039	3,100	29.23	14.03	2.08	220,995
1988	85,823	2,480	28.90	14.80	1.95	167,550
1989	86,303	2,548	29.56	15.41	1.91	164,800
1990	91,372	2,019	22.10	15.54	1.42	129,920
1991	93,307	2,293	24.57	14.36	1.71	159,690
1992	99,891	3,081	30.84	12.68	2.43	243,010
1993	98,142	3,172	32.31	13.07	2.47	242,640
1994	104,670	3,149	30.08	12.47	2.41	252,615

**Source: Guysuco Records**

**Notes: TC/TS is the number of tons of cane it took to make a ton of sugar.**

**TCA is the yield in tons cane per acre.**

**TSA is the yield of sugar per acre.**

# Chapter 8

## The 1989 Anti-Budget Strike, its Aftermath and the Restoration of Collective Bargaining

We have already seen that the IMF was in consultation with the Government over the restructuring of the economy, and that the latter had already introduced measures instigated by the IMF, which were embodied in the so-called Economic Recovery Programme (ERP). There had also been earlier measures which had created severe economic hardships for workers, resulting in protest strike action. The previous chapter discussed the FITUG day of protest and the attack on recognition agreements by state entities. Two weeks after the restoration of formal relations between the bauxite company and the unions, on March 31st 1989, the government presented the national budget. The major impact of the budget was the further devaluation of the Guyana currency, which moved the official exchange rate from G\$10 for US\$1 to G\$33 for US\$1. However, soon after the announcement of the devaluation the dollar was traded at Guyana's "Wall Street" at G\$62 to US\$1 (Stabroek News April 15th 1989). Wage increases were pegged at 20 per cent, which was seen by the workers as unrealistic and not in keeping with the consequences of the devaluation, which brought a rapid increase in consumer prices.

The Guyana dollar, which was stable for many years after independence, experienced a spate of devaluations from 1987 to 1989, some at the official level and others through the open window system in which it was traded on the black market at up to G\$50 to US\$1, when the official rate in 1987 was G\$10 to US\$1. Several union leaders objected to the IMF conditionalities imposed on Guyana and warned that the road to economic recovery through devaluation, as advocated by both the World Bank and the IMF, would not work. It had not worked before and only helped to trigger further inflation. Just before the budget, the prominent Caribbean economist and former Governor of Barbados Central Bank, Courtney Blackman, had warned that

devaluation was de-railing Guyana's economy. To support his contention he argued that " since its 1981 devaluation real GNP in Guyana has declined at a rate of negative six per cent per annum ... Between 1981 and 1987 the economy declined at an annual average rate of about six percent, unemployment is high and Guyana can't pay its foreign debt" (E C News, 18-3-89).

## **Response to the Budget**

The budget was seen by workers as "draconian", a phrase also used by the opposition parties in parliament. WPA Member of Parliament Eusi Kwayana, denounced it as "vampire budget" (Stabroek News April 8th 1989). However, the government side called it 'economic adjustment with a human face' (Chronicle April 7th 1989). The bauxite workers were not prepared to sit idly by and allow for negotiations or debate on the budget to take place before doing something. By April 3, the entire bauxite operation came to a standstill through strike action by the workers who demanded the withdrawal of the budget. As Stabroek News reported:

With a spontaneity of action never before witnessed in the history of the bauxite industry, bauxite workers effected a complete shut down of the Bauxite Plant in less than two hours on Monday... The strike action takes on great significance considering the fact that no union official featured in its agitation . The workers literally coerced the union officers into the fray (April 5th 1989).

The sugar workers, once again without their union endorsement, joined their fellow workers in the bauxite industry with a similar demand. By the next day both industries were strike bound. FITUG, under whose grouping these bargaining units fell, met on April 5th to review the situation, and decided after about three hours deliberation to endorse the action of the workers and to call a general strike with effect from the following day. This action also included other demands:

FITUG having had a meeting of leaders of all the affiliated unions and examined the situation, including the strike of the bauxite, sugar and other workers has unanimously agreed to call on the affiliated unions and the general public to take immediate strike action in support of the following

demands.(1). The immediate withdrawal of the 1989 budget. (2). The withdrawal of price increases on commodities imposed after the budget. (3). The restoration of subsidies on essential commodities. (4). The payment of a living wage and indexation after a new budget is agreed upon between the government and recognised trade unions. (5). The restoration of full trade union rights and freedoms, including the right to check off of union dues on behalf of recognised unions (1).

The leaders in FITUG also called on the TUC to support those demands and to take decisive action with a view to alleviating the burdens placed on workers. They regretted having to resort to strike action but mentioned that this was only done after repeated requests for dialogue with the government went unheeded and after the unilateral imposition of an oppressive budget. They warned the government of the likelihood of a failed recovery programme without the involvement of genuine representatives of the working people and urged all sections of the Guyanese society to support the strike call in the interest of their common survival (2). Two days after the strike call, FITUG was heartened by the response. This drew workers from several private and public sector agencies, including private transportation especially by hire cars and mini buses. As a result, FITUG announced publicly that it was endorsing the two Bishops' statement, made just before the February 24 day of protest, as an important and constructive contribution to national reform.

The organisation went on to invite "all groups of working people, no matter how small or large, to signify their support, by publicly declaring themselves affiliates or as supporters of FITUG objectives" (3). The intention was to provide an umbrella for those who feared the consequences of acting alone, an opportunity to participate in a cohesive body. This was intended to forge greater solidarity as people become more involved in the work of a larger group. The Guyana Council of Churches also called for a review of the Budget (Stabroek News: April 15, 1989), while the GHRA condemned the budget and stated that "overnight and without consultation, Guyanese have found that the purchasing power of their wages reduced to one third of its original value" (ibid: April 19, 1989). These calls were made in the context of the arrest of about sixty striking workers mainly from the sugar and bauxite industries, who were engaged in a peaceful demonstration in New Amsterdam, Berbice. Hire

cars and mini buses which supported the strike were impounded. This took place as soon as the owners went on the roads for their private errands. Despite these measures the impression gained by the FITUG leaders was that "it is expected that by Monday operations throughout the country would be brought to a standstill"(4). But that was not to be.

In a clear breach of the FITUG's decision, to which all the unions subscribed, the CCWU and the GPSU once more ordered their members to act differently. The GPSU did not call out its members, but instructed them to wait and see how the strike developed, while the CCWU decided that it was only going to call out its members for a limited one day protest strike on April 11. That was the beginning of the disintegration process, of what otherwise appeared to have been the first step towards the restoration of trade union and democratic rights. Before the CCWU members had concluded their one day protest, over three hundred were sacked, for what their employers in the state entities claimed to be unwarranted strike action (Chronicle April 13, 1989). The President of the CCWU claimed that the sacking was indiscriminate and "if disciplinary action is to be taken against a worker then dismissal is the last resort" (ibid: April 18, 1989). The government went on the offensive, dubbing the strike political and aimed at destabilising the country.

Meanwhile, the police continued their arrests of demonstrators. On April 10th they targeted the Parliament, the central point where the unions had concentrated their daily demonstrations. The government had also mobilised its supporters to hold counter- demonstrations in front of Parliament Building. Eleven protesters were arrested, among them the President, Treasurer and an Executive Member of FITUG, who was also the General Secretary of GAWU. Eight of them were charged with disorderly behaviour, an offence for which bail was allowed. Their crime was singing the union song "Solidarity Forever". Six of those arrested were released the same day. However, the President and Treasurer were taken into police custody at separate stations where they were kept overnight and taken to court the following day. All eight were placed on \$200. bail (Stabroek News: April 12th 1989). Both the President and Treasurer were scheduled to address a public meeting in the capital city, but

Daniels, the President did not show up for the meeting, having left the country. One of his close associates claimed that there was a plot by "goons" of the ruling party to assassinate him. When they were subsequently tried and their Counsel asked the Senior police officer why they were held in prison on such a trivial charge, the court was told that the police had information that the two, Daniels and Gopaul, were a threat to the security of the state. They were both fined \$250 in their absence (Trial Notes) though no fines were ever paid by them.

The church group was targeted the next day when 13 protesters, including three Catholic Priests, were locked up overnight and charged like their union colleagues with disorderly behaviour. They were engaged in singing Hymns (Catholic Standard May 7, 1989). A few days earlier three activists of the PPP were arrested and charged. By April 15, the police shifted their operations to the West Coast of Demerara where the strike continued to cripple the sugar estates in that region, seventeen marchers, including students from a secondary school were arrested and charged with taking part in an "illegal procession" (ibid: April 19,1989). Union officials explained that one of the heartening developments in the police clamp down on protesters was the admirable support given by members of the GBA, to those who were victims of the oppression. Many of their colleagues worked beyond the precincts of the courts as they sought justice for all victims. Their contributions helped the workers to understand that they were not alone in the struggle.

The repression moved to the air waves when the state radio refused to carry a broadcast by the Anglican Bishop, Randolph George on the "Church Calling" programme. It claimed that the broadcast was not devotional but political. This action drew condemnation from the Bishop and the Anglican Church. Incidentally, the programme producer Fr. Gilbert Harris was also the Chairman of President Hoyte's Advisory Council on Religious Affairs. The church questioned the authority of the sanctioning agency thus: "Are we to assume from the censoring of this programme that the Public Communications Agency considers itself a superior source of advice on religious matters?" (ibid).

## Continued Pressure

The unions had to keep the pressure on if they had any chance of coming out with limited success in the strike. Instead of expanding the strike after the dismissals of its colleagues, the CCWU retreated into its shell. The despotic actions by the government and the retreat of two unions evoked fear in other sections, especially in some private stores, whose workers had, until then, been on strike. Those workers returned to work. The strike peaked between April 11 and 13. However, by April 14, only bauxite, sugar, and the university workers were on strike. They were supported by students who had heeded a one day stay home call from the student body of the prestigious secondary school, Queens College. The two major earners of foreign exchange were effectively crippled and the strike was having its toll on the national economy with a reported loss of \$33m. a day (ibid: April 15, 1989). The government also announced that since the strike started and up to April 18, there were acts of arson on sugar estates which resulted in an estimated loss of US\$ 400,000. worth of cane plants (ibid: April 19, 1989). Additionally, a main government store on Camp Street, the Guyana National Trading Corporation (GNTC), was completely destroyed by fire. Police also reported other arson attacks, especially in sugar industry areas.

Public sympathy for the strike was widespread. The churches and other bodies, including large private businesses, professionals, farmers, fishermen, and private individuals donated money and foodstuffs to keep the sugar and bauxite workers on strike (NAACIE Report 1990). The growing solidarity between the churches and FITUG on the question of the budget and the living standards of workers strengthened the moral correctness of the strike call. Additionally, the demonstrations in front of Parliament buildings were multi-racial, multi-religion and represented almost every stratum in society. Some members of the police and army had shown sympathy for the strike and when it became clear that they were ignoring the workers' demonstrations, especially in the bauxite town, many security personnel from that community were replaced.



## The Government Response

Several groups had called on the government to engage the leaders of FITUG in dialogue. The government did not budge and instead held talks with the GTUC on the budget, despite the fact that previous representation on the budget had gone unheeded and it was approved in Parliament without any major change. That was an exercise in futility. As Mike McCormack pointed out, "a mechanism has to be found to incorporate FITUG into any negotiations, otherwise they will be meaningless" (Catholic Standard April 16th 1989). The CCL, which was the parent body of unions in the Caribbean, called on the government to act with dispatch to ease the sufferings of the workers and people of Guyana and to engage both the TUC and FITUG in dialogue and consultation (Stabroek News April 19th 1989). FITUG had also written to the Minister of Finance since April 6th, seeking a meeting to discuss matters of concern to workers in the national budget. Instead of giving consideration to the request, the Minister responded by saying that he was meeting with the TUC and therefore could not meet with every interest group (5). FITUG responded that:

unlike several interest groups, FITUG is a Trade Union Federation which has over two thirds of organised labour as members, inclusive of the workforce in the sugar and bauxite industries, which has been on strike since April 3, 1989. It would therefore be wrong to treat my organisation as a mere interest group. The failure of the government to meet with FITUG so far has already done irreparable harm to the economy and one just cannot wish away this reality. Our federation has repeatedly stated that we will not be bound by any decisions taken on behalf of organised labour by the TUC...(6).

FITUG further pointed out that it had no representatives on the TUC negotiating team because of the 'undemocratic nature' of that body. Further, it noted that while it had not officially withdrawn from the TUC, it would not return until there had been a satisfactory amendment to the rules, which had been a source of concern for over ten years (7). There was no response to the FITUG's letter. The attitude of the government was in sharp contrast with the position taken by its counterparts in the neighbouring Republic of Trinidad which was at the same time engaging both the TUC and the CPTU in joint discussions over the state of the economy of that country.

There were calls by other prominent organisations including the Miners International Federation (MIF), the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) and Solidarity of Poland for the Government to meet with FITUG to resolve the problems of the workers. It was the cable from the Solidarity leader which came in for special ridiculing from President Hoyte. The text to Hoyte was as follows:

Free independent trade union 'Solidarnosc' expresses solidarity to members of FITUG in their struggle for workers' rights and for improvement of living conditions of the working people. At the same time we appeal to the government...to stop the repression against union leaders and the priests who are with them and to start negotiations with union leaders immediately (8).

The President used the Workers Day to attack labour leaders and the striking workers. At the same time his public response to Walesa was obnoxious:

Comrades, I understand that a certain Mr. Lech Walesa, forgive me if I don't call his name right, forgive me, is alleged to have sent me a cablegram calling upon me to do two things- to have dialogue with FITUG. Well I would not comment on that.... He didn't say anything about arson and the things I have been talking about and what I want to say to him now is that I haven't seen this telegram. My secretary has a way of putting those things in the waste paper basket where they belong. She is a very competent secretary. But if perchance I see this one I think I will enjoy myself and have a little fun by having his cablegram replied to. If he had involved in arson and sabotage in Poland General Jaruselski wasn't going to allow him to be at large today to send me any telegram. I don't think he would have been in the land of the living. I do not think the gentleman can find Guyana on the map and if the cablegram is in English... and I would doubt very much that he knows English, well then perhaps he is not responsible for what is contained in it...(9).

Hoyte went on to deem it the greatest treason to invite foreigners to 'meddle' in the country's internal affairs and warned that the government speaking to FITUG was to invite confusion and indiscipline. He explained his refusal to speak with FITUG by pointing to the fact the government had been holding discussions with the TUC, which was the umbrella association for all trade unions in the country. He emphasised that the government would not encourage any disorderly procedure by having dialogue with the TUC and at the same time with several individual unions or group of unions. His view was that "it is a way to chaos and confusion and it offends my

own sense of due order and propriety" (10). Touching on the role of unions, Hoyte emphasised that trade union militancy could not mean calling strikes since that was self defeating. They had to ensure that the conditions were right to increase output and efficiency. Those union leaders, he warned, who took a different path did not really understand their role or were bent on deceiving workers:

Today as we embark on the ERP, trade unions as an entity have a decision to make, either they identify themselves with the ERP and work along with the programme, or face relegation to a marginal and inconsequential role in society (11).

Dealing with the dismissal of workers, Hoyte argued that just as trade unions had rights so too did employers. Unions should not believe that they could breach agreements and get away with it, for the employers had a right to assert their rights. Hoyte warned unions that if they were testing his patience they had better think again. They miscalculated, if they believed that he would not act firmly. He charged that there were criminal activities taking place and warned that the police were doing their work. "Let us not resort to any kind of self help in this matter. Once you unleash violence you cannot control it. So we have to deal with this situation and keep it within manageable bounds until we decide to strike" (12). Earlier, he charged that the politicians had taken over the strike, moving it away from its industrial base. He then attacked the sugar unions for seeking to wreck the industry:

If the sugar quota is lost the sugar industry will collapse and then Jagan, Gopaul, and Komal Chand will tell workers how they will eat and feed and clothe their children. This government is a firm government, it will not be intimidated and it is not going to yield...(13).

The government was resolute in its opposition to holding any discussions with FITUG despite the strike, nor was it going to move or adjust any part of the budget. It had clearly indicated that there was no alternative to the IMF programme. FITUG was stunned by the non-civility of the President's response to the internationally acclaimed labour leader and his remark that he did not have to ask Lech Walesa for the names of priests and trade unionists arrested, he could have got the information from his own Police Commissioner.

However, the movement also communicated with Solidarity, conveying to the Polish labour leader the tremendous inspiration and delight which the cable provoked among the working people of all walks of life. The statement went on to emphasise the nature of the workers' struggle:

Like Solidarity, FITUG has insistently and proudly acclaimed the peaceful character of the prolonged strike. Not a pane of glass or a bottle has been broken by workers. FITUG totally denounces any attempt by the government of Guyana to smear the image of the independent labour movement by allegations of arson and violence...We are all the more resolved to insist on a dignified solution to the present struggle in which the legitimate representatives of the workers are recognised and negotiated with (14).

While the President was complaining about procedure, and not meeting with FITUG because his government was meeting with the TUC, the administration nonetheless sought meetings with individual unions in the hope of breaking the solidarity of the protest. A meeting was in fact summoned between bauxite unions and the Minister of Finance on April 13, at which the unions insisted that the government should meet with the seven unions as a bloc (Catholic Standard: April 16th 1989). FITUG had taken a decision that any discussion with the government must take place with the involvement of the entire grouping.

The failure of the government to meet with FITUG drew condemnation from workers' representatives who claimed that all the government was doing was to worship a programme which has imposed unconscionable hardships on workers. They termed the ERP 'every race punishing' and 'empty rice pots'. The workers gained the impression from the government's actions and statements that the administration was not concerned about their welfare, because it did not take a stand on their behalf, as was the case of neighbouring governments. They cited the case of Venezuela, whose President made a stirring plea to the IMF on behalf of the poor, and whose message was made widely known in Guyana in a few of the local media. They referred to a letter written by President Perez to the IMF, following the riots in Venezuela just about the same time as the strike was taking place in Guyana. Perez alluded to the criticisms which had been voiced by many developing countries concerning what they

thought were the unjust terms on which the Fund conducted its international relations. The argument was that in imposing solutions for these economies due consideration was not given to the resultant consequences for the poor as a result of rapid decline in social services. This is how President Perez described the IMF conditions:

...they take no account at all of the international economic environment within which they have to be applied or of economic realities in the countries where they are implemented....This conduct on the part of the major countries, which have shown us the example of their democratic systems and their prosperity, but by their insensitivity and lack of understanding, preclude us from emulating them, is incomprehensible and unjustifiable ... It is the impoverished, who are in no way accountable for the errors or mistakes made by those who have governed them, who are punished by acute poverty and despairing violence .... It is impossible to carry out the necessary and urgent measures to adjust our economy and align it with reality in a context in which we must pay out more than 50 percent of the value of our exports to survive the public debt, a debt which increases whenever interest rates rise, new protectionist measures are promulgated or maladjustments provoked by manipulation of the prices of our exports, require further devaluations, and the prices people must pay for their food go up again. At the same time so as not to cancel out the results of the adjustments, wages become less and less adequate for sustaining family life, and unemployment rises to dangerous levels which erupt in violence - the only recourse open to the truly poor, as we know (15).

In response the Fund indicated that it was aware of the need to protect the poor during the adjustment phase and it was in recognition of this need that the provisions made by Venezuela for direct subsidies on consumer essentials and housing and for new welfare programmes had been allowed (16). It is evident from my later interviews that the workers knew through the publication of the IMF reply that they could still benefit from the retention of some subsidies on essential goods. They felt that the Guyana Government just accepted what the IMF proposed, without argument or protest. Workers believed that Perez's action should have been emulated by Hoyte. In addition, the representatives claimed that the workers did not wreck the economy - this was done through the government's mismanagement. Therefore, workers should not be asked to bear the brunt of the adjustment programme. They explained that big businesses were benefitting through tax holidays and in addition they were purchasing state-owned entities at bargain basement prices. Super salaries were paid to all sorts of so-called professionals and experts while the workers' labour continued to be

undervalued. Some workers indicated an understanding of what the Hoyte administration was seeking to do, but the method deployed, they claimed was wrong. They were behaving like 'big bullies' (Interviews: October 1994).

## **FITUG'S Indecision**

The strike was in its fourth week and despite government reprisals and its adamant department, the workers in sugar, bauxite and at the University of Guyana continued to hold out. Production in the sugar and bauxite industries was at a standstill. The country depended on the two industries, bauxite and sugar, for foreign exchange, and the continuation of the strike meant that a great deal of imported goods would be affected, since there was hardly any reserve of foreign exchange in the treasury. Fuel was anticipated to be the first to go and that would have had a crippling effect on many other sectors, since the government had no money to pay the fuel bill. The Canadian government was assisting by supplying that commodity to the country. Talks had taken place between key trade union officials in Canada and FITUG on this matter. The latter requested their Canadian counterparts to exert pressure on their government, to demand that the Guyana Government engage the democratic unions in talks. FITUG was also keeping the diplomatic community informed of the justification of the workers' struggles and had dispatched letters to all the Heads of Caricom countries and its Secretary General seeking their intervention:

...As it is now clear that the situation can only be resolved through mediation and as the Caricom Treaty has established industrial relations as an area for Community cooperation, we are seeking urgently your good offices towards this end...(17).

While the pressure mounted at the international level, one union official explained that the unions seemed to have lost the will to fight and to have forgotten the issues which started the strike. They also abandoned previous decisions and their public pronouncements about worker victimization. They also decided to take up offers made by respective managements for separate meetings. In fact one official mentioned that solidarity was broken from day one of the strike, when the CCWU and

GPSU failed to call their members out when there was a strong possibility that the workers were likely to respond positively since there appeared to be momentum for an all out struggle. Let us examine what took place.

Following the departure of Daniels (head of the GPSU and FITUG) pressure was put on the other Executive Council Members of GPSU to break away from FITUG. The government was successful in this. At a meeting of the Executive Council of the GPSU a decision was taken to break away from FITUG and to rejoin the TUC. Further, the General Secretary of the union, Leslie Melville, made a statement on April 13 on behalf of FITUG at a press conference, which was considered by the GPSU executive to be "irresponsible, indecent and disrespectful to the President of Guyana" (Chronicle: April 20th 1989). He was asked to withdraw the remarks made and refused to comply with the request, which prompted the GPSU to terminate his services. Melville had previously opposed the Executive Council's decision to put Daniels on 'absence without leave' and their order that he should not return to his desk unless a satisfactory explanation was given for his departure out of the country (Chronicle May 6th 1989). The union then came under the control of a high ranking PNC official, a Regional Chairman.

One GPSU official explained how the government was successful in recapturing and maintaining control of that union. He pointed out that the acting President, Farley Thompson, was a very close friend and colleague of Daniels and Melville and found it very difficult to write to them about the unpleasant decisions foisted on the Executive Council by Party hawks. Many of them knew that what they were doing was wrong but they were scared to stand up and say so. They were all public servants and having seen the type of pressure that was put on Daniels because he stood up for the workers, they decided to remain quiet. He claimed that the ruling party was bent on maintaining control of the GPSU and was engaged in manipulating the results of the elections which were held in June 1989. Following the sacking of Melville, and with the Executive coming under the control of the ruling party, the GPSU took the decision to grant 'ordinary members' status to persons from whom dues were deducted under the agency shop. This change made it possible for the 'ordinary

members' to vote in order to counter a serious challenge by PPP supporters at the union elections.

Two high ranking PPP activists who were in the public service made a bid for top posts at the elections. Roger Luncheon sought election to the position of a Vice-President while H N Nawbatt was nominated to contest the position of Deputy General Secretary. Both persons later moved to the courts to challenge the results (Chronicle: June 21st 1989). However, that did not stop the installation of a PNC controlled Executive. The official claimed that Farley Thompson was unopposed for the position as President, and after his confirmation the new President realised how trapped he was and soon migrated. It was shortly thereafter that the Regional Chairman took over as President.

Three days after the decision to suspend Daniels another decision was taken, this time to withdraw from FITUG (Chronicle May 9th 1989) while a statement was issued shortly thereafter instructing FITUG to stop interfering in GPSU affairs. The GPSU accused FITUG of taking a "political course in which scheme of things the workers' welfare takes third place" (ibid: May 12th 1989). The decision by that union Executive stunned some FITUG officials, since the resolution to affiliate was approved by the General Council whose authority can only be varied by the Congress of the Union (Catholic Standard May 14th 1989). But in such matters rules were hardly observed and court proceedings rarely changed the situation.

The CCWU head, Gordon Todd, had also taken over as acting head of FITUG, following the departure of Daniels. One official explained that he was never around at meetings of FITUG although the meetings were held at their Headquarters, and his absence was a constant source of concern to Daniels in the initial stage of the strike. He also did not turn up at the FITUG May Day rally for which he was billed to speak. The moment Todd took over, the focus of the strike shifted to one of bringing it to an end, with attention being given to the terms under which this could be done. Some FITUG officials gave unions in the sugar and bauxite industry the green light to explore overtures made by the management of those Corporations, with a view to



commencing negotiations. The CCWU was also involved in conciliation at the Ministry of Labour over the dismissal of 300 members from state entities, and apparently had an assurance that the workers would be reinstated once there was a restoration of 'normalcy' in the country.

By this time, FITUG had launched its twelve point recovery agenda (Stabroek News May 3rd 1989). This was prepared with the assistance of Clive Thomas of the UGWU, who was at the Mona Campus of the UWI. He had flown back from Jamaica to lend solidarity to the strikers, including his members at the university. The programme outlined FITUG's opposition to the budget and suggested areas where improvement in the economy could take place, and on that basis was intended to mount more pressure on the government. But instead of putting pressure on the government some of the leaders were preparing for resumption of work. The government knew of the weakening of the resolve to struggle at leadership level of FITUG, hence state agencies decided to capitalise on this fragility.

The Chairman of the Sugar industry wrote appealing to sugar workers to return to work as the industry was unlikely to meet its EEC quota. He offered two weeks incentive pay if the industry achieved a production output of 75,000 tons, with the first 16,000 tons beyond the current output of 49,000 tons attracting one week's pay, while another week's pay would be given for a further 10,000 tons. He informed sugar workers that up to the 27th April, the industry had lost \$56m worth of sugar through arson and discarding of canes already harvested but which could not have been grounded. Additionally, he pointed out that there was a production loss of 23,000 tons of sugar amounting to \$391m. As he pleaded for a return to work and for union discussions he emphasised: "I have to tell you honestly that because of these severe losses, and with the continuing strike, a secure future in the sugar industry is now gravely at risk" (18).

Without informing the other unions in the industry GAWU responded to the Chairman's letter on May 3, and requested a meeting to discuss its intent. A meeting was arranged for May 4, 1989. NAACIE was invited to the meeting subsequently by

GAWU and was informed that Guysuco would like to make an offer which might be satisfactory to the unions. The GFF&SU was also invited to the meeting. The following extracts from Guysuco's notes give an indication of what transpired:

Cde.Sankar welcomed members of the unions' delegation and expressed appreciation at GAWU's response to the Corporation's letter of 27-4-89. He noted the union's request dated 3-5-89 for a meeting to discuss the intent of the Chairman's letter which was sent out to workers. Consequently, a meeting was arranged for today and it was hoped that something meaningful would flow from the discussions. Cde. Chand said that it was subsequent to the notification of this meeting he had invited the NAACIE and the GFF&SU to attend and...would like to be advised what was the intent of the Corporation's letter, that is, what the Corporation had to offer (19).

Following clarification, Chand made the following demands before resumption could take place. Guysuco must be prepared to increase wages substantially, to look at incentive payments with a view to having meaningful adjustment and to improve fringe benefits once resumption took place. Further, the unions expected that when the package was finalised it would have to be sufficient to enable the workers to take care of the increase in the cost of living and live a decent life (20).

On May 5th, at a meeting of the FITUG, Lincoln Lewis of the bauxite unions reported that workers were trekking back to work and as such there should be a resumption call by FITUG to ensure an orderly return to work. He further mentioned that if resumption did not take place the 'trickle would become a flood'. He reported that there was a meeting with the Management of Guymine the day before, as Guysuco was meeting with the sugar unions, and the possibility of the workers receiving a good agreement existed, including the union securing an educational grant of an amount equivalent to 25% of all union dues collected. This had been withdrawn several years before by the Burnham administration. Lewis emphasised that, based on a 14 point plan submitted by management, there was a likelihood of a satisfactory outcome, with benefits taken away previously restored (21). The representatives from the GAWU reported to the same meeting that the sugar strike was still effective. However, there was a different version to Lewis's assessment of the strike in the

mining sector, where his colleagues claimed that the strike was still very solid. Following the report on the strike situation, it was agreed that since the unions had nothing to lose by the meetings, then discussions with their respective managements should continue. Further, it was also agreed that there should not be any commitment to end the strike unless a unified decision was taken at FITUG level. The meeting was informed that the Bauxite workers would like to hear from the FITUG leadership before they returned to work. As the first round of meetings with the management ended:

NAACIE's N. K. Gopaul says union leaders cannot tell workers to resume duty given the current situation. The parties met for about 90 minutes Thursday. We have indicated to Guysuco that the workers are very concerned with the poor level of wages which they have been offered following the budget ...it will make life harder and impossible (Stabroek News: May 6, 1989).

Follow up meetings were held between representatives of both the bauxite and sugar industries and the unions in those entities. The GAWU was unhappy with the outcome of the meeting with Guysuco, as Chand observed: "that the Corporation has not changed its position. Since there was no tangible offer to the workers the unions would be unable to persuade them to resume" (22). The bauxite workers had also rejected the terms which were put to their unions by their employer. With this apparent stalemate: "Guyana's two most prominent Christian churchmen have offered to mediate in the six week dispute..." (Stabroek News May 10, 1989). Bishops George and Singh felt they could bring the parties together to explore ways of bringing the strike to an end. They were worried at the social conditions prevailing in the country. This timely intervention by the two Bishops helped to strengthen the resolve of the workers to continue their struggle. However, some of the leaders in FITUG were not prepared to explore other possibilities for the continuation of the strike. Instead, they were bent on ending the strike.

At a further meeting of FITUG on May 12, although there was no progress at the talks and the strike situation had not changed, the GAWU argued that the strike should be brought to an end. A new element was injected into the discussions,

something which was of no consequences to GAWU in previous struggles, and which was not raised before. It had to do with the fact that the rain season was about to begin and the related out of crop benefits the sugar workers could lose. This would make the strike ineffective. Chand emphasised that the bulk of sugar workers wanted a resumption of work and that the bauxite workers might very well have to go it alone if they did not end the strike. He insisted that the strike should be called off before the workers became demoralized. The meeting was also notified that, two days before, the bauxite workers had rejected management's offer and they were still in a defiant mood. The NAACIE and UGWU took the position that the bauxite factor must be taken into consideration. Lewis had previously notified FITUG that his union could have ended the strike since May 7th, but that it was in the interests of unity that the plan was shelved. He wanted a united return to work by workers and insisted on a joint statement from FITUG before any resumption of work. He was confident that the workers would heed a united call from FITUG.

The NAACIE emphasised that the unions must not lose sight of the objectives of the strike. It felt that the government was in a very vulnerable state and that the unions should continue the pressure. The NAACIE cautioned that attempts by the Corporations' Heads to meet with the unions were not their doing, but reflected the government's strategy of dividing the unions. If enough pressure was put on the employers the government would have to change from its tough stance. Moreover, if a decision was taken to end the strike then the workers should be consulted, since it was the rank and file which had provided militancy and leadership at every stage of the strike. But the GAWU insisted that it wanted to sign the terms of resumption as early as possible. It argued that no one would talk with FITUG and since the strike was not called for the overthrow of the government there should be an orderly retreat.

It was clear that GAWU had taken the side of the leaders of the bauxite unions, and the CCWU, that the strike should be ended. They were all aware that the bauxite workers were in no mood to surrender but were sure that, once the leaders ended the strike, the workers would go back to work. One FITUG official, reflecting on these events, remarked that it was evident that the workers were in a mood to struggle on

and their will was undermined by leaders who, without securing any benefits for them, just wanted to end the strike. The leaders and workers were 'poles apart' (Interview: October 1994). A leading PPP member and sugar representative explained that the decision was taken when the opposition PPP assessed the situation, and came to the conclusion that the government was likely to fall given the mood of the sugar and bauxite workers, and that there was little chance of the PPP becoming a main player in any new government since it was not in the forefront of this struggle (Interview: November 1994).

In fact, during the fourth week of the strike many workers and military personnel were talking about the formation of a civic interim government. The PPP sensed that there was also the prospect of military intervention which could have had serious repercussions for parliamentary democracy in the country. Therefore, it was better if the strike was ended and for the PPP to work towards securing changes in the upcoming elections. Under this scenario it was likely to form a government, since it was the most established party in the country. This was therefore seen as a good reason for the GAWU to join in advocating the ending of the strike. The CCWU and the leaders of the two bauxite unions felt the strike should be ended for different reasons. The bauxite unions felt, based on information obtained through the grapevine, that they were likely to make a breakthrough at negotiations. Once the strike ended, there was a real chance of winning back the educational grant which was a commitment at previous meetings. However, this was merely a false promise intended to break the unity of the strike. The CCWU's indication that the dismissed workers would only be considered for reinstatement if there was normalcy at the industrial level was also seen as a motivating factor for the ending of the strike.

Based on the strong views by the leaders of the GAWU, CCWU, GMWU and GBSU, that the strike should be ended, the UGWU and NAACIE conceded on the firm understanding that FITUG should end the strike in a united way, as soon as this was possible. As a consequence, the following decision was arrived at:

It was the general consensus that since the bauxite workers were scheduled to meet on Saturday 13-5-89 and the NAACIE was scheduled to have its

Executive Council meeting on the same day, then the issue should be put to their membership. FITUG should again meet on Monday or Tuesday 16-5-89 to review the matter and if it was a consensus to order resumption, then a joint appropriate release be issued bearing the signatures of all the respective union leaders ordering the workers to return to work to coincide with the signing of terms of resumption agreements with the respective companies (23).

## **The Ending of the Strike**

When the PPP headquarters received the verdict of the FITUG meeting that the strike would end after all the mechanisms were put in place, an official pointed out that its leader was not happy that there was a condition attached to the ending of the strike. The PPP wanted an immediate end to the strike, so a decision was taken at both the GAWU and PPP level to end the strike on Saturday May 13, 1989. The NAACIE Executive Council which met on the same day, received information that the Strike was going to be called off by GAWU on instructions from the PPP. A delegation from NAACIE was authorised to get in touch with Dr Jagan to apprise him of the grave danger of such an action. The NAACIE members from the various locations had already reported to that union's Executive Council that, contrary to GAWU's report that sugar workers would like the strike ended, the workers were adamant that the strike should end only with the withdrawal of the budget or an offer of substantially higher wages (NAACIE Minutes, May 13, 1989). The NAACIE and GAWU representatives were coordinating this activity very closely on the individual estates and were meeting with workers on a daily basis. At times they invited leaders of FITUG to address workers at different locations. The officers of NAACIE as well as the Field Secretaries of GAWU were in daily contact with the sugar workers. So they were well aware of the feelings of the workers. They knew that the workers did not want to end the strike.

The NAACIE's delegation visited Dr Jagan at his Freedom House Headquarters, where the leaders of GAWU were also present. NAACIE and GAWU had, up to that point, enjoyed nearly three decades of close relations and hence the meeting was sought by NAACIE so that the union could benefit from the thinking of its sister

union. The GAWU confirmed that they were going to sign the terms of resumption on that same day. The NAACIE delegation explained to the GAWU officials and Dr Jagan what had been reported to that union's executive meeting, namely that the workers were not in a mood to end the strike. The NAACIE delegation further explained that the ending of the strike as contemplated by GAWU was contrary to the decision of FITUG. But there was a disagreement over the terms of the decision. GAWU said that the decision was that the strike should end immediately while NAACIE argued that a unified approach had to be taken in keeping with the decision. NAACIE urged an urgent meeting of FITUG to clarify the position, but the GAWU leadership was adamant that the strike should come to an end. The situation was clear to NAACIE and the UGWU, and was reinforced by a statement which was issued by the FITUG publicity officer, Leslie Melville, when he admitted to the press after the meeting that an end to the strike was in sight:

We have assessed the strike situation and heard reports from all our unions whose members are on strike, and in respect of the talks we have had with the two companies. Everything seems to be pointing to a situation where FITUG will advise a back to work call (Stabroek News: Saturday May 13th 1989).

If there was a decision to end the strike as of May 13, Melville would have said so to the press, but he made it known that at the appropriate time FITUG would make a back to work call. When it seemed that there was not going to be agreement at the meeting with Dr Jagan over the meaning of the decision at the FITUG meeting of the 12th, the following took place:

The NAACIE delegation pleaded with him (Dr Jagan) for two or three days in keeping with FITUG decision so we could all go back to work unitedly. Dr. Jagan said 'we must not allow the tail to wag the dog. We should end the strike' he asserted. Our union insisted for time and he said 'we will end the strike and we can settle it on the streets if you don't agree with GAWU'. We appealed to him not to break the solidarity of the workers and he responded 'we will always get the workers as more and more the objective situation for struggle is surfacing. There will be further oppression and with elections coming next year, the situation will be ripe for an all out struggle'. He was not perhaps conscious about the great harm that could be done to the movement when a strike is ended in disarray (NAACIE Report, 1990:49).

Thus, the GAWU went ahead and signed the terms of resumption agreement. However, the GUYSUCO officials were not prepared for this turn of events, since at the last meeting the GAWU was still holding out for a firm commitment on increase wages. So there were no officials around and, as a union representative explained (Interview: October 1994), they had to search for the leader of the employer's delegation, who they eventually found at a cricket club. He then put his team together and the agreement to end the strike was signed late on the evening of Saturday May 13. Guysuco then allowed the representatives the use of their vehicles with drivers to travel through the sugar communities announcing the end of the strike. The nine point agreement contained no resolution of the initial demands made by the workers. Five of the terms dealt with the usual conditions. "There shall be normal resumption of work ... as from Sunday 14.5.89 ... no victimisation ... no break in service ... no worker shall be denied his normal work opportunity..."(Chronicle May 14th 1989). The union further agreed that the strike days would not be treated as available days and that a special incentive of one weeks' pay would be earned by the workers for a production of 16,000 tons of sugar in excess of the 49,000 tons and for an additional 10,000 tons of sugar a second week of incentive would be paid. Negotiations on wages would commence once production had resumed and there would be the normal deduction of union dues (ibid) which had been stopped for both NAACIE and GAWU when the strike started.

With the signing of the 'terms of resumption', the GAWU officials argued that the union had made a breakthrough for collective bargaining. However, that was not so, because it was the defeat of the Labour Amendment Act by NAACIE which had paved the way for the restoration of collective bargaining. Additionally, the terms agreed upon were in fact offered to the workers by the Chairman of the Corporation since April 27th, when he appealed to workers to resume duties. There were also concerns about the retrospective payment of wages, since GAWU accepted payment from May 14th under the guise of equivalence of treatment, rather than the payment from April 1st which was offered by the corporation, so there was some loss in retroactive payments to workers.(24).



## Workers' Rebellion

As GAWU was announcing the ending of the strike there was overwhelming rejection of the back to work call. The workers were in a rebellious mood. They had, two days earlier, rejected a second plea by the Chairman offering the same conditions which were agreed upon by GAWU (25). It was the first time that the sugar workers had been so defiant. The workers sent all the leaders who went to tell them to end the strike, packing. The outraged workers indicated that only NAACIE would be able to discuss resumption of work with them. The PPP leader was made aware that a leader can be loved by his people, but yet invoke their wrath on a sensitive bread and butter issue. When it was clear that there was an almost complete rejection of the back to work call, Guysuco issued a statement that the turn out of workers was satisfactory and harvesting commenced on all estates (Chronicle May 16th 1989). Two days earlier the state media carried the headline "Sugar Workers End Strike" (Chronicle May 14th 1989). On day five of the back to work call the story was "Grinding resumes on six estates" (Chronicle May 18th 1989), while the following day it was "All Guysuco estates now grinding"(Chronicle May 19th 1989). These were all intended to sow confusion among striking workers, since up to then only 922 tons of sugar had been produced for the week (ibid)n and this represents the production of less than a day when Guysuco has all its factories in full operation. It was reported that "Despite the confusion, worker instinct appears to have won out and a relatively small number responded to GAWU call" (Catholic Standard May 21st 1989).

As the production figures were released, Guysuco admitted that there was a slow response to the back to work call, and that it had only reached the level of 50 to 60 per cent. The GAWU made a similar admission, stating that many workers may have gone out of their districts (ibid). But the rejection was widespread and GAWU officials had been rejected. As Thakur points out, "the sugar belt reported at least a dozen incidents of assault on GAWU officers..." (ibid: June 25,1989). In an apparent attempt to save the face of the GAWU leadership, the FITUG leaders who were in the conspiracy to end the strike authorised Melville to issue a statement to the press which contradicted his own statement made on May 13th.. Without a meeting or the

knowledge of the UGWU or NAACIE, he advised the following:

FITUG at a meeting on Friday, 12 May, on the recommendation of its affiliates, has sanctioned the resumption of work in the sugar and bauxite industries and at the University of Guyana. The resumptions follow reports of negotiation of acceptable conditions between two of the affiliates on strike, and the respective administrations (26).

It was reported that this statement "was spread in the thousands round sugar estates, hoping to persuade the workers that bauxite workers had gone back to work and FITUG was calling off the strike" (Catholic Standard: May 21st 1989).

The bauxite leaders were also trying to get their members to accept the proposals which had been tabled by management. They anticipated that, with GAWU signing the terms of resumption, it would become easier for them to convince the bauxite workers to go back to work. A meeting was arranged with bauxite workers on the same day as GAWU's ill-fated act. The workers were given copies of the FITUG release as well as the terms which GAWU signed. However, this did not convince them to go back to work at that time. They were outraged at what had taken place and demanded to see leaders of FITUG. As the pressure from the workers mounted Todd and Melville, again at the behest of GAWU, issued a statement reaffirming the correctness of FITUG's decision to call off the strike and advised the public that a meeting had been arranged for Wednesday May 17th, "to discuss complaints from three of its affiliates about members of the Executive violating democratic decisions... of the organisation..." (27). Again the UGWU and NAACIE were unaware of any release, complaints by anyone, or the reason for such a meeting. The first time they heard about the meeting was from the press. The same day in which the release was issued, the "unlikely troika" of Todd, Melville and Komal Chand travelled to the bauxite community, unknown to the UGWU and NAACIE, with the hope of persuading the workers to return to work:

Unlike the Biblical Daniel, they were not equipped with the qualities needed in a lion's den. The bauxite workforce, totally fed up with the leadership vacillation, vented its spleen on the hapless trio. Melville was grilled over his own behaviour with respect to his union, Todd over his inactivity in FITUG, apart from trying to call off the strike and Chand for the blatantly political

explanation he gave for calling off the strike. The verbal discomfort of the visitors was reinforced by workers in the audience holding up their belts in the form of nooses. At the end of the evening Todd stated he had been misinformed about the Linden situation and he supported the continuance of the strike (Catholic Standard May 21st 1989).

While Todd and company left the Bauxite town on the note that the strike was continuing, they did nothing to ensure that there was consolidation of the workers' struggle. Instead they continued their campaign, arguing that the decision to end the strike had been taken on the 12th May. They then concentrated their energies on laying the blame for the confusion on NAACIE and UGWU, and accused Fr. Rodrigues of the UGWU and the General Secretary of NAACIE of undemocratic conduct. No effort was spared by GAWU to castigate these leaders, and leaflets bordering on libel and character assassination were in abundance throughout the country, all with the intention of saving face and persuading the workers back to work. The entire hierarchy of the PPP was also put into the defence of GAWU. The visits of these seasoned politicians in the sugar belt also met with serious rebuke. This is how one analyst explained the situation:

The problem for both GAWU and the bauxite leaders lay in the fact that the leaders of the two smallest unions NAACIE's N.K. Gopaul and UGWU's Fr Malcolm Rodrigues are by far the most prestigious and trusted of the FITUG leadership. Their endorsement of a return to work call was essential for the credibility of the rest of the leadership and for such a call to be effective. Neither NAACIE nor UGWU were prepared to move from their membership's clearly stated position... The wrath of GAWU then turned on NAACIE's Gopaul who in the meantime had issued a statement reiterating the position that each union's fundamental duty was to represent its membership and if that meant that FITUG had to take different positions on the strike then, unfortunately, FITUG had to recognise that fact.... The workers in sugar and bauxite effectively exposed the gulf between the GAWU/PPP leadership and the rank and file... (Catholic Standard: May 21st 1989).

As the workers rejected the pleadings of PPP and GAWU leaders to return to work, they claimed that the strike had to be called off because of lack of funding. They accused the Treasurer of FITUG of making small sums available to GAWU while he was paying out more to the NAACIE members, and claimed that millions had been poured in by imperialist agents to bribe sugar workers to move away from GAWU. It

was a dirty campaign that involved the highest in the ranks of the PPP. They were engaged in vitriolic attacks against leaders of NAACIE. As one union official remarked, if the energies and resources which were put into the back to work effort had been put into the promotion of the workers' cause, victory would have been accomplished for the workers. The accused union leaders maintained that they had acted in keeping with the decisions of the organisation and more so in the interest of the striking workers. NAACIE had indicated that the unions were given clear cut instructions from their members and any deviation by unions was at their peril, and argued that, while unity is a goal to be striven for in FITUG, it could not be pursued at the expense of democracy (NAACIE Report 1990:50). The blunders of FITUG were assessed by Chase when he remarked that:

One cardinal mistake was for FITUG to allow individual unions to independently negotiate resumption instead of FITUG using the occasion to enforce its own recognition by government as a minimum of ending the strike. Arising therefrom came the decisions of individual unions to resume work when by every principle in the book that decision ought to have been a collective one... NAACIE's policy having been proved right even though at times we stood alone, for the future we need to have greater faith and confidence in ourselves (28).

The NAACIE and the UGWU had been left alone to continue the struggle. In the meantime, the GAWU officials were involved in identifying to management, those NAACIE members whom they considered to be involved in influencing workers to stay away from work. They had become the security agents of the employer and government, identifying NAACIE members for punishments including dismissals. Two Executive members of NAACIE from the Diamond Branch were dismissed (NAACIE Report 1990). This was happening despite the fact that, up to that time, over 200 activists had been arrested and charged by the police on trumped up allegations. Some were even tortured during interrogation.

As the wrangling among the unions continued, the University of Guyana (UG) workers were targeted for victimisation. Their union had written to the administration on May 10, to address a number of outstanding issues. One week later, instead of

meeting with the union, the administration indicated that they were going to dismiss workers for failing to return to work. Hence, notices had been sent to the homes of 37 non-academic staff whose termination did not require the sanction of the University Board. The university claimed that the dismissal letters were issued after the administration had come across a press release from FITUG which indicated that it had instructed the sugar, bauxite and University workers to resume duties (Chronicle: May 20th 1989). The dismissals brought protest demonstrations and militancy on the campus, which included students and solidarity from NAACIE. This was in sharp contrast to the response of the CCWU when their members were dismissed. The teaching staff then put into gear a campaign which resulted in several leading academics threatening to resign en bloc if the workers were not reinstated (Stabroek News May 24th 1989). The counter offensive of the UGWU severely disrupted classes and seriously threatened the examinations for the academic year. FITUG leaders Todd and Melville were again forced to explain what they meant by their sanctioning of the ending of the strike. "It was therefore expected that the UGWU and the University of Guyana would have negotiated acceptable conditions before normalcy was restored in the University" (29). These leaders had been so trapped by their attempt at deceit that their contradictions were creating turmoil over the graves of Critchlow and Rodney. They had shown some courage, however, at the end of their statement. In as much as they were aware that workers were already dismissed they warned:

that nothing should be done by the UG. administration to further disrupt an already unstable industrial relations climate, unless it is prepared to face the consequence of its action. FITUG affirms its solidarity with and support for the dismissed workers of the University (30).

It was a university worker who asked what solidarity the two gentlemen could give when by their actions they had destroyed the basis of such solidarity. They were "jokers" he claimed. It was the militant mood of the academics and students on the campus that eventually forced the university administration to settle with the UGWU, on May 26th, with the subsequent reinstatement of the workers. By the first week in June the majority of CCWU members were also reinstated. Some who were employed in a Branch Store in the mining town refused to take up the offer of reinstatement

(Stabroek News June 24th 1989).

The dismissals at UG coupled with the threat posed to other strikers through their colleagues from the GAWU, made it clear to the NAACIE that the disunity at the leadership level was making it difficult to continue the strike. Workers had become vulnerable to widespread victimisation and hostility from some of their comrades who were previously engaged in the struggle with them. The union held discussions with the striking workers in sugar and bauxite and the workers agreed that the strike should be brought to an end. This was done although the union claimed that the will of the workers to continue the struggle was very much intact. But the workers and NAACIE equally recognised that a strike of that scale required leaders who did not lose sight of national goals for sectional interests, and that the will of the workers had to be matched by that of their leaders. There had not been any gain in financial terms, and even the production target set for sugar was not accomplished so the bonus agreed upon was not paid. The bauxite unions also did not benefit from the promises made to reinstate the educational grant nor was any satisfactory agreement obtained. However, the workers' rejection of directives from a confused leadership and their assertion of political independence were of historical significance. In addition, the multi-racial nature of the struggle laid the basis of a new era for racial harmony and integrity in the country (ibid: May 24, 1989).

The manner in which the strike ended, and the internal rift which continued months after the strike, left a bitter legacy among workers. Some representatives later indicated that it took several months before the GAWU leaders could conduct any meaningful dialogue with their members (Interview: August 1994). However, the display of unity between bauxite and sugar workers, which prevailed during and after the strike, left no doubt that the potential for workers unity was strong, provided there was also decisive leadership. The workers were capable of winning their own battles. As Chase lamented:

So the strike on which so many placed such high hopes ended in disarray. Worse still, FITUG was not recognised by the government; none of the political demands was secured; and relations between ourselves and GAWU

became sour. We have done what we can and will continue to do whatever reasonably can be done to heal this breach. Unity of the sugar workers is paramount (31).

It has equally been the hope of the mass of the workers, who are even up to today facing the hardships imposed on them through years of mismanagement, that good sense will prevail among the leaders, in order that their interests are protected and enhanced.

### **Wage Increases 1989 - 1994**

Despite the failures outlined above, it was not until after the 1989 anti-budget strike that the wages of the sugar workers made some appreciable movement. There were a number of reasons why wages were increased after the 1989 strike. In the first place, the sugar workers did not show any interest in working a full week. The low wages were seen by employees as a disincentive and unattractive to make them work continuously in the industry. The tax regime was oppressive. It had taken its toll on workers pay packets and at times 50 per cent of overtime earnings were going back to taxation. The workers were therefore refusing to work overtime and many instead used the weekends to do private work. More money, free from taxation, was obtained by workers if they did odd jobs created largely through the underground economy, in and around their communities. The industry was in crisis, and its production output began to decline at a rapid rate. It was recognized by the employers that wages had to be improved to lure the workers back to full production. Thus, the management sought and obtained the Government's permission to increase wages beyond the level of the 20 per cent which had been announced in the national budget and which had been introduced in the sugar industry from April 1, 1989.

Furthermore, the unions kept the pressure on management for further increases. The GAWU was in direct negotiations with Guysuco, while the NAACIE had moved to conciliation, seeking a further increase from its original demand following the national budget. The first concession from Guysuco came in the form of tax relief. It

offered all employees who performed duties on Saturdays and Sundays tax free earnings concessions for those days, commencing August 1, 1989 (Guysuco Circular IR:017/17/89). This had already been granted in the bauxite industry for a period of over one year, as an incentive to those workers, and the sugar unions had been urging the extension of this facility to the sugar workers. However, it was not until after the authorities' failure to encourage workers to work on a regular basis had serious repercussions in the sugar industry, that the government allowed the weekend tax free concessions.

The unions were then invited to meetings at which they were informed that a decision had been taken to increase wages and salaries by a further 22.26 per cent with effect from September 1, 1989. Despite calls by the GAWU and NAACIE for a more substantial increase, the Corporation went ahead and unilaterally implemented its proposal to make the increase of 42.26 per cent for the year. When asked why the Corporation took that course, after the government had stubbornly resisted any further increase beyond what the Minister of Finance had stipulated in his budget, a senior Guysuco official pointed out that the sugar industry was in crisis. It faced the possibility of falling short of its EEC quota and negotiations with Booker Tate for a new management contract were in the making. They were aware that Booker Tate was going to increase wages as the first step to try and turn around the industry, so the government was asked to allow the management a chance to see if an additional increase would lure the workers into the fields once more. With some hesitation, the government agreed to allow the increase. Additionally, the international lending agencies argued that there must be an increase in wages in the productive sectors under public control in order to be able to prevent skilled workers from moving over to the private sector, whose wages were far more attractive.

### **Booker/Tate in the Driving Seat**

Soon after the increase was decided upon, the President announced that talks were going on between the Government and Booker Tate regarding a management contract for the sugar industry. This decision was taken without consultation with the unions in



the industry. The GAWU, while sympathising with such a management contract in the industry, repeatedly announced its opposition to the privatisation of the industry. Similarly, the NAACIE has advised caution and warned that privatisation was not a panacea for development. It charged that it was the lack of democracy at every level which was responsible for the many evils in the country, and that economic development could not take place in an atmosphere of fear and electoral fraud (NAACIE Report 1990: 37). However, many workers were very jubilant over the announcement and argued that "it's a good thing Bookers coming back. At least they will save the industry and stop the corruption" (ibid).

As soon as agreement was reached, a top level delegation from Booker/Tate, headed by its Chairman Sir Michael Caine, invited the unions to a meeting on May 17th 1990. They informed the unions of their plans to rehabilitate the industry to the point where it could produce once again 250,000 tons of sugar a year. It is ironic that the new managers were going to put all efforts and energy to producing half of what Bookers had anticipated they would produce by 1980, that is 500,000 tons (Lowachee Report, 1970). The unions were told that Booker/Tate was interested in having significant ownership of the industry and would like to see the government distance itself from its operation. This widening of ownership was likely to give Guysuco a better future because there would be greater autonomy in the formulation of policies. The management team promised the unions an increased remuneration package and greater incentives for workers, while they were looking forward to support from the unions. The NAACIE representatives at the meeting identified many areas of arbitrary management practices encouraged by the Chairman which resulted in the low production level. The union suggested that for the industry to make progress the Chairman, Harold Davis, should be removed (NAACIE Report, 1990:38).

### **Workers' Views of Booker Tate**

The management of the industry has always been a contentious issue among workers and their unions. The nationalisation of the industry had widespread support. However, the manner in which the industry operated after it became state owned

created enormous difficulties for workers. The turn of event in putting the management of the industry in the hands of the previous owners is of profound significance to workers, hence I sought their views in my interviews. The eight foremen who were interviewed indicated that after nationalisation things degenerated considerably. They pointed out that in Bookers' days there was careful planning and as such they would be aware of the work to be done long ahead of schedule. Harvesting was done on time, except for strike periods, weeding, fertilizing, factory maintenance, replanting, and in fact every aspect of the operations were undertaken on time and to a time schedule. They explained that after nationalization, and especially after the 1977 strike, the situation became chaotic. The twenty per cent replanting exercise was never achieved, planned maintenance in the factory was never accomplished, spares were always in short supply and everything depended on the availability of foreign exchange. In effect, the government squandered money and stifled the sugar industry. They could not see the rationale where the biggest earner of foreign exchange was starved for foreign exchange to conduct its operation efficiently. One concluded, "thank God Bookers came back and things are beginning to take shape, with production gradually improving"(Interview: September 1994).

The majority were of the opinion that, while the management contract with Booker/Tate was necessary, they did not believe that the industry should be privatized. "It should be state-owned so long as you can have democracy and proper accountability". They were firmly of the view that there were enough skilled Guyanese personnel to manage the industry in a competent manner, and would support any position taken by the current government to resist pressure to privatise the sugar corporation. The representatives were critical of the "super salaries enjoyed by them big boys at the top while the workers get a mere pittance"(ibid).

The NAACIE representatives who were interviewed claimed that the situation of workers had deteriorated tremendously over the years after nationalisation. They recognised that massive increases in wages took place over the period, but claimed that "the increase in the cost of living has devoured the increases paid and also our savings, which we had carefully put aside over the years" (ibid). They all agreed that

the industry was facing many difficulties which were brought on "through mismanagement and political interference by the previous regime" (ibid). They all supported the decision to invite Booker/Tate to manage the industry after it was run down by the PNC regime, but they were divided on the question of denationalisation. The majority were of the view that the industry should be privatized since they strongly believe that the workers were going to receive justice under private ownership. The four who opposed privatisation claimed that they strongly supported the PPP government, elected in 1992, on the matter. They emphasised that "the sugar industry should never be owned by a foreign company. The history of exploitation in the industry is still something which we would like to forget" (ibid).

The representatives of the GAWU claimed that life in the sugar industry had never been easy. "It's back breaking. We never get anything without a struggle. Dem Bakra had lil understanding but when Burnham tek over the industry, things get from bad to worse" (Interview: October 1994). There was need to remove many of the estate managers who they claimed were "square pegs in a round hole, and put people who knew something about the sugar industry so that things can get going again. All wha some a dem big boys who a get fat, fat salary know fo do is suck sugar cane. Dem na know A to bullfoot" (ibid).

Concerning the management contract with Booker/Tate they all agreed that there had been overall improvement in the sugar industry. They were concerned over the "super salary dem big boys a draw down" but agreed that "there may be need to keep some six expatriate managers to ensure some a them local big boys who think dem a king, don't get out of line" (ibid). They made this suggestion by revealing that the first Chairman after nationalisation used to behave as if he was "almighty god"(ibid). Sixty percent of the representatives believed that the government should continue to exercise control over the industry. The remainder did not care. Their main concern was to be able to meet all their financial obligations at the end of the week. Asked if they would continue to support Government ownership of the industry if the PNC were to take over power again, they said "definitely not, let Bookers take it back then" (ibid). But they were quick to remark that they did not see the possibility of the PNC

ever getting back to power. They were not fearful of a PNC under Hoyte, but said that "a PNC under Hammie (Green) could be dangerous for Guyana, and it appears as if he still has control of a big portion of the PNC" (ibid). The representatives were all in agreement that wages under Booker/Tate had increased substantially, to a point that would never have been achieved under the PNC administration.

What should not be overlooked, however, is that in the 1960s the industry was charged a 2% commission towards services rendered outside of Guyana (Guya Persaud 1968:59). An industry whose pricing and marketing arrangements and strategy were determined by external institutions must be competent enough to be able to operate in an environment which can be considered to be competitive. Given the state of decline of the industry, a management contract proved to be beneficial to the industry. Even if the management services rendered would add an additional cost of about five percent to the industry, the charge to the industry could be justified. Such considerations underline the complexity of the issues facing the sugar unions and their members in responding to developments in state policy concerning the organisation and management of their industry.

### **Wage Increases Under Booker/Tate**

The moment Booker/Tate took over the management of the operations of the sugar industry, they kept their promise and informed the unions of their intention to increase wages by 50 per cent with effect from October 1990. This was followed by an additional increase of 75 per cent to all unionised workers in March 1991. A year later wage increases of 22 per cent were implemented, with an additional 21 percent taking effect from March 1993. "These progressive increases moved the minimum daily rate from \$50. in October 1990 to \$300 in 1993, an increase of 500%" (32). In addition to the increases implemented during the period 1990 to 1993, the corporation introduced a 40 hour work week for the GAWU categories in July 1992. This matched the reduction in the working week which had been achieved, through bitter struggles in the 1970s, by the NAACIE members in the clerical sections. The corporation further pointed out that it had:

implemented a wide range of changes and improvements in other employment benefits, social welfare, health, and transportation. Employment costs have risen over the period as follows:- 1989 - \$515.1m; 1990 - \$980m; 1991 - \$2,703.7m; 1992 - \$4,873.1m, 1993 cost will exceed the \$5 billion mark, representing a high proportion of the total costs of the corporation. These improvements were made possible by the sharp increases in productivity and production which occurred during the period (33).

However, the Corporation had predicted that the prospects of the industry for 1994 were much less favourable than the previous years since production was likely to remain stable, with a likely fall in revenue due to a reduction in the average selling price obtained for sugar. It was hoping to put a brake on wage increases and warned that any significant increases in wage costs would pose a serious threat to the viability of the industry. It also indicated that there was a need to borrow in excess of \$650 million from the banking system to meet cash flow needs during 1994. Increases in wages beyond the projected level would automatically reduce funds available for investment in plant and machinery and "directly and immediately have repercussions on the national economy, and on the Corporation's ability to maintain existing employment, wages and benefit levels"(34). It was against the background of these serious precautionary measures that the 1994 negotiations were conducted.

This was also the first year that any real challenge had been posed to the new management on the question of wage increases. The increases which were introduced for the previous years were implemented after extensive discussions with the unions, though the employer had been able to convince and reach an accord with the GAWU more easily than with the NAACIE. For instance, while NAACIE rejected the 50 per cent wage offer in 1990 and demanded a higher increase in a joint meeting with the GAWU under the new management team, the GAWU General Secretary went public and announced that it was unlikely his union would reject the increase which was offered (Stabroek News: October 14, 1990). The statement was published the day

before the Corporation was scheduled to meet with the unions again at a joint meeting. The GAWU's announcement was construed by NAACIE as an unfortunate development since:

it struck at the very root of strong and effective collective bargaining. Our grounding in negotiations/ collective bargaining teach us not to telegraph your final position until such time that you envisage an impasse, more so, it would be disastrous to telegraph such position in the press. The corporation as expected took full advantage of the comment and ... stood its ground on the 50 percent offer (NAACIE Report 1992:23).

At that same meeting the corporation announced that it would meet the unions separately since there were differences in positions on the wage offer. Unmindful of the harm which was done to the negotiations, the GAWU General Secretary went to the press and accused the NAACIE of making outlandish demands on the Corporation. This lack of unity on the part of the unions resulted in no further increase being given (ibid). As NAACIE General Secretary Kaisree Takechandra explained, much more could have been achieved for the workers if only the unions had demonstrated a unity of purpose and not allowed themselves to be divided by the employer (Interview :November 1994). The method of negotiating separately was a ploy used by Bookers in the past to try to settle wage claims with the weaker unions and then seek to impose whatever was agreed upon on the other unions. The separate negotiations resulted in different positions being taken by the unions. During the 1993 negotiations the GAWU agreed to the 21 per cent increase, while the NAACIE opted for conciliation and ultimately requested arbitration after failing to reach an accord with the employers. However, this request for arbitration was overshadowed by other developments with respect to increments.

The NAACIE General Secretary claimed that, after failing to get Guysuco to increase wages beyond the level proposed by them, the union had to concentrate in getting increases in another area. Hence emphasis was placed on improving incremental rates. The union was able to secure an improvement from the old structure of 4 to 10 per cent to 6 to 15 per cent from January 1990, and then again in December 1992 increased it further to the range of 8 to 17 per cent to take effect from January 1993.

With that agreement all NAACIE members would receive increments at the new rates from the beginning of each year, based on their performance over the preceding year. The rates were also paid to some of the eligible categories in the GAWU membership.

While the NAACIE was awaiting the setting up of the Arbitration for the 1993 negotiations, the union was informed by its members that the Guysuco had failed to award increments for 1994 in accordance with the collective agreement. The workers were given increments between a range of 2 to 5 per cent instead of the agreed 8 to 17 per cent. Additionally, those workers who had reached the maximum of the scale were denied any increment. When the matter was raised with the Industrial Relations Department the acting Head indicated that his department was unaware of any instructions to vary the agreement, and he asked for time to investigate the matter and get back to the union. His failure to communicate with the union resulted in a strike by NAACIE members from January 3rd to 10th, 1994. In the course of the strike the Ministry intervened, and Guysuco admitted that they had stopped the increments of workers who had reached their maximum although they had in the past effected payment. They claimed that the time had come for them to rationalize the situation. Again they argued that they could not carry the annual increases at such high rates. Before the strike came to an end they gave an undertaking that the situation would be corrected to ensure that no worker was paid less than the minimum of 8 per cent (NAACIE Report 1994).

The NAACIE General Secretary, Kaisree Takechandra, pointed out that the strike showed the GAWU in a particular light because it took place under a PPP government, and a leading officer of the GAWU went around the sugar belt informing striking workers that NAACIE did not have a case over increments and that the strike was politically motivated (*ibid*). There were even personal attacks levelled against officials of NAACIE. The chorus was picked up by field secretaries of GAWU, after their members began to agitate for increments along the lines being fought for by NAACIE. The GAWU eventually relented in its opposition to the NAACIE action and called out its members on a one day protest action some two weeks after the NAACIE strike. In response the employer applied a uniform approach to the issue by

agreeing to upgrade to 8 per cent all workers who had reached the maximum of the scale. They also offered to conduct a joint job evaluation exercise with the unions, following which increases would be awarded. That prompted NAACIE not to pursue Arbitration for the year 1993.

## **The 1994 Negotiations**

The 1994 negotiations took place in a climate of disunity among the unions in the industry. The Guysuco continued to meet with them separately, thus capitalising on the divisions which exist. The GAWU offered initial resistance to the wage offers, sensing the fighting mood of its members, but agreed, on August 19th, to an increase of 15 per cent from 1st March and a further 5 per cent with effect from August 1st 1994, to be applied to the wages/salaries of the workers as at February 28th 1994. The NAACIE continued to demand much more, and rejected the same offers even before the GAWU had agreed to them. With GAWU accepting what the Guysuco claimed to be their final offer the NAACIE readily conceded that its task, as in previous years, would be difficult and would require a great deal of effort on the part of the rank and file to force the Corporation beyond the 20 per cent point.

The NAACIE General Secretary indicated that the branches in the sugar industry were alerted and kept informed on every round of negotiations. The workers were very dissatisfied with the offer of twenty per cent and more so were unhappy over the position taken by their sister union. Further, the toughness and thoroughness with which the cases were presented on both sides brought back memories of negotiations conducted in the early 1970s, before wage imposition by the State. Takechandra sensed that the union's best chance was to opt for Arbitration and so after the talks broke down at conciliation the Executive Council took the decision to ask for the assistance of the Ministry of Labour, by requesting them to set up an arbitration tribunal. The parties met and agreed to the composition of the tribunal, but there was an initial delay in arranging the first meeting, when the corporation made a last minute attempt to meet with the union and appeal for its understanding of the Guysuco's position. The Chief Executive had two meetings with NAACIE officials on



the issue and reiterated the corporation's position in being unable to finance additional increases. Following this, the NAACIE General Secretary explained that, after long and hard deliberations, it was decided as an act of goodwill to sign the package for the twenty per cent increase. In addition, the workers had their leave passage allowances increased by \$3000 per annum (Interview: November 1994)..

In many respects the 1994 negotiations could be considered to have taken place in a spirit of genuine dialogue, with full restoration of the process of free collective bargaining. However, there were divisions amongst the workforce about the significance of this return to collective bargaining. To illustrate, when foremen were asked if they were satisfied with the negotiations concluded by their Union for 1994, they were divided. The majority felt that there could have been some improvement in certain other conditions of service, such as passage allowances and better salary scales. Two of the foremen, who are known supporters of the governing PPP party, indicated that, while they would have been happy with higher wages, they were satisfied that the government has the enormous task of "reconstructing" the economy and should not be pressured into making bigger pay outs (Interview September 1994).

When asked individually if the Government should be given a chance to secure an agreement, especially in the light of the poor state in which they took over the economy, they all agreed. They pointed out that they suffered for "twenty eight years under a dictatorship, why should we not give our leader a chance to make things right for everybody" (ibid). When they were questioned whether they would like to see unions taking a position only in furtherance of a trade dispute or in protecting the interests of the members they served, six supported the position while two took the view that this "should be the case but because of the present situation in the country we have to support the union (GAWU) and the Party". They all condemned the role of their former union President, Richard Ishmael, and General Secretary, Cleveland Charran, for fighting "the ole man" (meaning President Jagan), when he was Premier in the 1960s, instead of vigorously representing their interest against the 'sugar barons' (ibid).

This they claimed to be the main reason why they wanted to rid themselves of "those bloodsuckers". They were happy with the feeling of security they had, belonging to a "powerful" union, noting that as foremen they were not known for militancy. However, they believed that their cause would be better served by the militant rank and file "labourers". Most of them would have preferred to be in one staff Union, NAACIE, along with their subordinates, the Charge Hands, but they were satisfied with the GAWU.

The NAACIE members were asked to assess the performance of their union, and despite my senior position in the union they appeared quite uninhibited in their answers. The majority were satisfied with the services provided and were happy to provide reasons. These included the fact that it was the only union which fought for the restoration of increments and against the Labour Amendment Act; it was the first to win forty hours and paid maternity leave; and it had also gained higher wage increases in arbitration awards for the period 1971-1975 (Interview: November 1994). Because of these results and the commitment of its officers the NAACIE was expanding into other areas outside sugar. They cited electricity, mining, timber, rice, telecommunication, and the commercial sectors, where workers have moved over to NAACIE since the early 1980s. They further pointed out that, again because of its "militancy and track record", the union was able to absorb three staff unions within the industry. On the question of salaries and other conditions they were vocal that the current position was "very unsatisfactory". They claimed that "NAACIE alone could not advance the interest of workers, since the wage impositions by the government from 1977". Further, "even when the four unions got together and expanded into seven unions later on, the situation did not change". They claimed that they and their members were engaging the employers all the time, but a "combined reaction from the government and the hand picked managers were too much for us to handle alone, hence the depressing low salaries" (ibid).

On the negotiations for 1994 they were all unhappy with the negotiated settlement, but the majority expressed a sympathetic understanding of the circumstances which forced the union into the accord. However, two very vocal representatives were very

critical of the settlement. They claimed that the members were in a mood to struggle, but the unions decision saved the day for the government and the sugar corporation. This is how the two vented their anger:

Earlier in the year we had to fight for the right amount of increment to be paid to us. Guysuco violated our agreement, and we were not going to take this sitting down. We struck and got solid support from all the locations. Even Blairmont, which, within recent times had been weak, gave us solid support. We had a partial victory and were mobilising for the big issue-negotiations. The members were ready to take industrial action to enforce our demands, when the General Secretary, Kaisree Takechandra, and his negotiation team came to discuss a settlement with us. We could have taken the increases when GAWU signed their agreement with Guysuco since they were offering us the same increases. Why did we go through this delay to set up machinery for arbitration and then decide to accept Guysuco's proposal?(ibid).

The General Secretary and his negotiating team had successfully obtained the approval, after some persuasion, of the rank and file members and the Executive Council. As the General Secretary pointed out:

the two were the ones who were vocal when the matter was discussed at the membership level. They accepted the position of the majority but will still make their objections known and in a very forceful manner too. The members bought the idea of clearing this year (1994) since GAWU had accepted the wage offer and it would have been difficult to convince a tribunal to award us something more given the circumstances. Additionally, the job evaluation jointly conducted between the unions and management had been completed and this offered the union a splendid opportunity in making a sound case for substantially higher wages at the next round of negotiations (ibid).

The General Secretary pointed out that he had a scare when he received a copy of a letter from the entire membership of Uitvlugt factory informing management that they no longer wished union dues be deducted and they were serving notice terminating their membership with the Union. It was just a prank intended to express their disgust over the signing of the agreement. The letter was never sent to management. The workers were disappointed that they did not have the opportunity to launch a struggle for higher wages. They felt somewhat defeated. But in the end they knew that it was almost impossible for NAACIE alone to succeed in obtaining a satisfactory

settlement. The General Secretary explained:

They knew the difficulties we had in the increment case without the support of any other union. The position taken by these representatives is positive since political sympathy for the ruling party will not be a consideration when wage claims are determined (ibid).

On the question of whether they thought that the unions should be involved in politics, the NAACIE representatives were very clear that "the politicians should do their jobs and the trade unions should promote the interest of the workers". They argued that trade unions could be involved in political struggles, but to be affiliated to political parties could heavily compromise the union. They felt that if the previous PNC government had still been in power, GAWU would not have so easily accepted the increases which were offered and which created difficulties for NAACIE:

But you see it's their Party in government so they would not put pressure on it. It is wrong, totally wrong for a union to be affiliated or supportive of a political party, especially one in government. They compromise the interest of the workers (ibid).

The workers were then asked if conditions had improved since nationalisation in a significant way, and again they were unanimous in their negative response. The majority were supportive of the idea that both NAACIE and GAWU should merge or at least they should conduct joint negotiations, especially on bonuses and wages. They claimed that there would be enough pressure on management to raise the level of wages to a realistic level.

Workers from the other sections within the GAWU, fifty-seven people from the field and factory areas, were asked if they thought trade unions should be affiliated to political parties and this was greeted with a mixed response. Almost sixty per cent were of the view that they should not, but that unions should be free to make political demands in furtherance of workers' interests. About ten per cent took a position that trade unions should desist from being affiliated to the ruling party, and that it would be a good thing if some trade unions could work closely with the opposition parties without being affiliated, just in case the government decides to take anti-workers'

measures. The remainder, thirty per cent, were very supportive of the idea of unions being involved in party politics.

In the light of these responses they were questioned about whether they thought that sugar workers' interests would be properly looked after in the light of the closeness of their union to the ruling party, since the Honorary President of the union had now become the State Executive President, while the union President and General Secretary and at least three other senior officers were Members of Parliament. They all indicated their loyalty to the ruling party but wanted the union to know that their loyalty must not be construed as a willingness to give up their right to struggle for a decent way of life. They suggested that whenever they saw things were not going too well they would continue to take appropriate measures to correct the situation.

A number of examples were cited to support their position. In particular, on at least three occasions in the first half of 1994 the workers refused to heed calls from their union leaders to go back to work, and continued strike action at Wales, Blairmont, and Albion Estates. Additionally, they were very conscious that management was trying at times to change conditions by "reduce pricing on certain jobs thinking that we will accept, because we will not want to strike against our Government. But they were surprised because every time they attempted a trick, we took strike action" (Interview: September 1994). It is worth noting that in 1993 and up to June 1994 there was a higher incidence of strikes in the industry than during the previous two years. Indeed, Guysuco expressed its concern over this situation, which it claimed was outside of the "normal procedures for taking industrial action" (Press Release, February 11th 1994), and gave statistics to highlight its concern. It stated that for January 1994 there were 52 incidents of strike with a loss of 10,770 man-days as compared to 33 strikes in January 1993 with a loss of 3,251 man-days. This reflected an element of workers' independence of action, beyond the 'control' of the union at the national level. This is illustrated by the failure of the GAWU to persuade the workers back to work at Blairmont, a situation confirmed by the management of the industry when it stated:

It is understood that attempts by the union (GAWU) to get a resumption of work have been without success. Strikes and work stoppages of this sort disrupt production, result in production loss and materially affect the efficiency of the Corporation (ibid).

The representatives, however, claimed that they would "work hard to make the government succeed but they will not take nonsense from the managers". They claimed, that although there were more work stoppages, they returned to work always conscious of the targets they had to accomplish. Their aim was always to surpass their targets once their concerns were addressed properly. On the question of the last negotiation 65 per cent indicated that they were satisfied with what was achieved by the union for 1994, while the others believed that Guysuco could afford much more. Over eighty per cent, however, were unhappy at the existing level of wages when the cost of living was taken into consideration. They were confident that they would be able to secure greater benefits once the production level improved. They were all in support of the two unions, NAACIE and GAWU, conducting joint negotiations for wages and other related matters, claiming that greater benefits would flow out of this type of solidarity. About sixty per cent were of the opinion that the government should seek to reduce the cost of living before putting emphasis on increasing wages every time the cost of living goes up. Some of them spoke on the issue as if they were practising economists.

Against this background Neville Hilary, the Chief Executive of the Corporation, made some valuable observations on industrial relations problems which continued to be a source of concern to the industry. At the signing ceremony he commended the NAACIE and Guysuco for arriving at an agreement for 1994 without recourse to strikes or arbitration but through patient discussion and negotiation. He pointed out that the agreement represented considerable financial gain for workers and enshrined the commitment of the parties to the development and implementation of a new job evaluation scheme. It opened a new era of collaboration between the two unions, GAWU and NAACIE, and the Corporation. Moreover, it should lay the basis for a sound and equitable pay structure for the benefit of both the employees and the corporation. Hilary used the occasion to raise his main concern:

It is the vexed question of strikes in breach of procedure. Such instances are, unfortunately, all too common in our industry. They are very costly in terms of lost production for the industry, and lost earnings for employees... they strike at the very heart of the relationship between the corporation and trade unions. The recognition and procedural agreement sets out the basis upon which the parties will conduct their affairs. In effect, the parties are voluntarily agreeing to a set of rules which will enable them to further their interests and maintain a mature and constructive relationship. If at any time these rules are not respected by either party, a threat is posed to this fundamental agreement (35).

The Chief Executive appealed to the parties to resolve problems through discussions and negotiations and concluded that the signing of that agreement amply illustrated the point he was trying to make. Many of the representatives, while agreeing that the procedures in agreements ought to be followed, maintained that the biggest violators were management personnel. This situation had developed over the long period of exploitation in the industry. They were of the firm view that, given the same degree of commitment to dialogue on the part of the new Guysuco personnel, the situation in the industry could be dramatically improved.

All the representatives and management personnel who were asked to identify the most crucial period for the Corporation, maintained that the 1995 negotiations which was conducted once again jointly by the two unions, could hold the key to sound industrial relations in the industry. They were happy over the manner in which the job evaluation exercise had been conducted, jointly between the unions and the corporation representatives. Further, both management and the unions' representatives expressed the opinion that the outcome of the negotiations, which were once again jointly conducted between the two unions and Guysuco, would pave the way for "either a make or break situation". They believed that the parties would have the opportunity to properly price the various jobs, having already assessed their nature, and this should enable them to introduce rates and salary scales which were likely to operate smoothly over a period of time.

## Conclusion

The first part of this chapter establishes once again the fragile nature of the progressive union alliance. The indecisiveness of the leaders resulted in open conflict and argument with each other. However, in the midst of this confusion and criticism among the leadership, the workers remained resolute and opposed to government policies. The union membership's confirmation of their determination came in a variety of ways, most notably their defiance of the leaderships of FITUG, the GAWU and even its political ally, the PPP. The strike which started over an imposed wages settlement and the structural adjustment programme, based on IMF policies, resulted in workers in two crucial industries waging the most significant multi-racial workers' struggle of the last thirty years in Guyana.

Instead of capitalising on this show of solidarity by these groups of workers, the union leaders once again proved ineffective. Individual leaders lost their sense of direction and fell prey to offers made by individual managements. This had the effect of dividing and weakening the workers' struggle. The end result was that the workers had to return to work without achieving any of their original demands.

Given the strained relationship among the unions, especially between GAWU and NAACIE, the ability of the workers to influence or challenge the employers on any significant issue was undermined. As a consequence, it became difficult for unions to achieve advances in wage levels via genuine collective bargaining. While both unions attempted to maintain strong bargaining positions, they were relatively unsuccessful in their endeavours.

The return of Booker Tate initially reaffirmed the division between the GAWU and NAACIE. A new management contract was offered and wages were increased by significant amounts. Although collective bargaining was restored, the wage increases and tax concessions which were offered to the unions and workers came about primarily because of the poor state of the industry, and the attempt by the employers to increase workers motivation and to attract workers back to the plantations.



Between 1990 and 1994 the problem between the unions was that GAWU adopted a policy of accepting company offers quickly, thereby creating difficulties for NAACIE who attempted to further improve the offers. This division, however, was partly overcome in 1995 when the unions agreed to participate in a job evaluation exercise as well as joint negotiations. Whether this can be maintained is a question for the future.

### **Endnotes:**

1. Press Release dated 89-04-05 signed by G V Daniels, GPSU; A Angel, GMWU; Lincoln Lewis, GBSU; Komal Chand, GAWU; J R Ramsammy, UGWU; Gordon Todd, CCWU; and N K Gopaul, NAACIE.
2. *ibid.*
3. FITUG press release dated 89-04-07 signed by Leslie Melville, Press and Publicity Committee.
4. *ibid.*
5. Letter to the Secretary of FITUG from the Minister of Finance dated April 25, 1989.
6. FITUG's letter dated 89-04-27 signed by B. Philadelphia, Secretary to Minister of Finance.
7. *ibid.*
8. Cable dated 27-4- 89 from Lech Walesa, President, Solidarnosc, Gdansk, to President H D Hoyte.
9. Taken from address of President Desmond Hoyte to the May Day 1989 rally organised by the TUC.
10. *ibid.*
11. *ibid.*
12. *ibid.*
13. *ibid.*

14. Press Release dated 89-05-04, signed by N.K.Gopaul on behalf of FITUG. See also Catholic Standard of May 7, 1989.
15. Text of a letter by Venezuela President Carlos Andres Perez to Head of the IMF Mr. Michel Camdessus as reproduced in Catholic Standard of May 7, 1989.
16. Reply by the head of the IMF to President Perez's letter also published in the same issue of the Catholic Standard.
17. Letter dated May 5, 1989 from N K Gopaul, Treasurer, FITUG to the Heads of Government of countries within the Caricom Community.
18. Letter of Appeal to all sugar workers dated 27th April, 1989 by H.B.Davis, CCH. Chairman of the Sugar Corporation and sent to the sugar Unions via covering letter IR 082/89 of even date.
19. Extracted from notes of Guysuco meeting on May 4, 1989 with the sugar unions. ref. IR.096/89. No.4/89.
20. *ibid.*
21. Extracted from notes of FITUG meeting held on May 12, 1989.
22. Guysuco notes of meeting held with sugar unions on 9-5- 89. ref. IR 096/89. No.5/89.
23. Taken from Notes of the FITUG meeting held on Friday May 12, 1989.
24. See Draft Agreement produced by the Corporation during the talks with GAWU.
25. See letter dated 11th May 1989, signed by Harold Davis, Chairman of the Sugar Industry.
26. Press statement of FITUG signed by L Melville, dated May 13, 1989.
27. Press statement of FITUG signed by L Melville and Gordon Todd, dated May 15, 1989.
28. Address by Ashton Chase to the 41st Delegates Conference of NAACIE. May 1990.
29. Press Release dated 90-5-25 from FITUG signed by Todd and Melville.
30. *ibid.*
31. Address by Ashton Chase *op cit.*
32. Taken from letter IR:200/5/94 dated May 4, 1994 from D P Sankar, Industrial

Relations Director, Guysuco, to the General Secretary of NAACIE.

33. *ibid.*

34. *ibid*

35. Remarks by the Chief Executive Guysuco, on November 10, 1994 at the signing of a new collective agreement between Guysuco and NAACIE, at the Head Office Staff Club, Ogle.

# Chapter 9

## Conclusion

This research has addressed almost every major struggle of the sugar workers during the period of thirty years up to the end of 1994. It has also dealt with three areas of union activity and practice - union rivalry, resistance and wage settlements - in some detail. As was pointed out earlier, a number of important national events have been emphasised since they also gave a broader picture of the crises confronting unions and workers in Guyana. It is not intended to address all of the many themes which could be developed out of what is reported here, as this would greatly widen the scope of the research. Instead, the focus is on the character and implications of the political affiliation of the unions, in particular as this has been related to a decline in the living standard of the workers. Thus, throughout the thesis, a major theme has been the significance of political affiliation for relations between unions, for their approaches to bargaining and to state policy, and in consequence its influence upon their effectiveness in responding to and representing their members. The concern of the thesis has been with the political and union struggles around these issues.

Throughout the period covered by the research the positions taken by the parties to all the major disputes led to failures to reach satisfactory settlements. The 1964 strike revealed that the workers were caught up in a political struggle as part of the strike over a genuine industrial relations grievance - trade union recognition. While there were occasions when a resolution of the dispute was possible, the opportunity was wasted because particular political interests replaced bargaining calculations at the bargaining table. What was even worse was that the government undermined itself by the continuation of the strike, and as result the country was left racially divided. Thus, the recognition dispute continued unresolved for another twelve years. Another factor in this dispute was that it was not pursued in an organised manner by the union

after 1964. It was the workers who were in the forefront of the agitation, while the GAWU was merely responding to the workers and the union it was seeking to replace, the MPCA.

The 1977 strike, which took place under a régime accused of undemocratic conduct at elections, witnessed state intervention of an unprecedented nature. The deployment of almost the entire state machinery against industrial action, coupled with the recruitment of scab labour, resulted in the prolongation of the strike. While the union movement was prepared to settle the strike on what many saw as reasonable terms, the government was concerned to force the workers into submission. The government's response to the strike was based on its perception that the PPP and its trade union arm, the GAWU, were engaged in a political struggle aimed at destabilising the country. The adamant position taken by the government as it sought 'to teach the PPP and GAWU a lesson' led to the virtual destruction of the industry, and with it the wider economy. The effect was further hardship imposed on the workers through the austerity measures introduced by the government.

The worsening economic crises in 1979 and the early 1980s stimulated further worker action, but the lack of coordination at the national and political level, as well as between trade unions, resulted in victimisation, retrenchment and dismissals of workers. In short, throughout these struggles the workers suffered and made few if any gains. Most of their union leaders were either affiliated to the ruling party or afraid 'to rock the boat'. The might of the 'vanguard party' was a force which the workers had to contend with. The depleted resources of the workers and the lack of effective co-ordination of their efforts added to their woes. In fact even when the progressive unions took control of the TUC in 1984 they were not able to achieve the unity necessary to put an end to the onslaught on the workers. The one union which attempted to challenge this situation actively was the NAACIE, but they received limited support from leaders in the progressive alliance. Even in its struggles against the Labour Amendment Act, the NAACIE was unsuccessful in receiving more than token support.

Although the rank and file members continued to campaign for improvements and used different tactics (in particular hit and run strikes) in protesting harsh economic conditions, their leaders gave little leadership and were unable to consolidate their struggles. This ended with the ill fated 1989 strike, when the unions and their members ended up on different courses. Although the government was able to force the workers into submission in the course of these major struggles, it paid a substantial price in the form of a battered economy and a sugar industry that in 1990 had achieved the lowest production level since world war two.

By the 1990s, there was considerable worker disaffection about negotiations and the role of unions in this process. Those interviewed within the GAWU categories were dissatisfied over the manner in which the MPCA had negotiated wages on their behalf. They were still unhappy over the level of wages they were currently receiving, but expressed a willingness to accept what was agreed for 1994 in order to give their government 'a chance to put things right'. They also indicated, however, that they would not hesitate to take industrial action over any infraction of their conditions of work. Again a majority of this grouping supported the position that the industry should not be privatised under a PPP government, but supported privatisation if the previous rulers were to regain power. The majority of those interviewed in the NAACIE categories supported the privatisation of the industry to allow it to expand. They were grossly unhappy over their level of wages, and expressed their readiness to take industrial action if called upon by their union to improve their lot. The vast majority of all those interviewed supported the idea of a merger of the unions in the industry or, at minimum, joint participation in negotiations. They believed that workers would benefit more if this situation was achieved. It would help to forge greater unity and solidarity so as to apply pressure on management for an overall improvement of working conditions.

On the very sensitive issue of the independence of unions, the majority of workers' representatives in all three sections were supportive of the position that trade unions could be involved in political struggles but they should not be affiliated to political parties. The analysis of the role played by some of the politically affiliated unions in

Guyana shows how the workers' interests were heavily compromised. The research reveals how political interference wreaked havoc on the economy and the industrial life of the society. It has emasculated managerial functions, especially through the promotion of individuals on the basis of political loyalty above technical competence. The unions which gave sustenance to the doctrine of the "paramountcy of the party" were engaged in the substitution of a political agenda rather than the promotion of the interests of the workers. In this regard, the ruling party aided those unions so as to ensure their control of the TUC. In these ways, political interests were promoted within the labour movement.

## **Guyana and Post-Colonial Industrial Relations**

The problems discussed in this thesis are not unique to Guyana. It has long been common to argue that trade unions in post-colonial or 'third world' countries tend to be particularly liable to subordination to government and/or political parties and to function as much as political agencies as representatives of workers' economic interests.

At least five reasons for this are emphasised in the literature:

In the nationalist movement, there was often a close involvement between party and unions in a common struggle against economic oppression and colonial rule. The institutional links formed in the colonial era are difficult to break.

'The conditions for successful and genuine collective bargaining of the "ideal" Anglo-American style are rarely present in the developing countries' (Sturmthal 1972: 149). Competition from a low economic base within a hostile global economy offers limited scope for the improvements in wages and conditions which unions in developed countries were able to negotiate for much of the post-war era.

The state is often a/the main employer in strategic sectors, and in any case wishes

to control prices and encourage investment. While such concerns exist for governments in developed countries - particularly in a climate of economic crisis - they are more severe in the third world. Thus the state is likely to press for particular restraint in union action. If unions resist, this implies a political as well as an economic challenge to the state.

Third world governments often possess weak 'legitimacy' (Clapham 1985: 43) and regard autonomous unionism as a threat. Hence they often attempt to co-opt and incorporate unions, and if they fail in this, to suppress them.

Labour market conditions often make it difficult to develop robust and independent union organisation; and there is a strong incentive for union leaders to co-operate with government - particularly if they share its goals of economic development - in return for organisational advantages such as dues check-off (Sturmthal 1972: 140).

However, Bates has argued (1970: 368) that while these pressures are strong they are not universal. He gives examples of countries where union support for or opposition to the government and its policies reflects a primarily economic rather than political logic. In the Caribbean a number of trade unions have aligned themselves to political parties. However, it is only in the Guyana context under the PNC regime that the union movement has been unable to articulate the struggles of the workers fearlessly and without having to consider the repercussions that their action may cause in their relationship with the 'paramount party'. In Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad, the leaders of unions did not hesitate to use the strength of the workers to challenge perceived anti-working class measures, even at times against their own party. Not all of their challenges have been successful, but the fact remains that in the Caribbean the majority of union leaders with party affiliations have boldly put the cause of the workers before party politics. The following cases can be cited to illustrate this point.

In Jamaica under the Seaga administration (Jamaica Labour Party) in the 1980s there were several instances where the union of the deputy Prime Minister Hugh Shearer,



Bustamantee Industrial Trade Union, took strike action against the government. Similarly, under the Manley administration (People National Party) the union which is the main support to his party, the National Workers Union, took strike action against his government, and leaders like Cilve Dobson, who was a government Senator, took the side of the workers. A similar situation has been repeated in Barbados, where the Barbados Workers Union (BWU) has taken action against the party it supports, the Democratic Labour Party, while that party was holding the reigns of Government. Leroy Trotman while General Secretary of the BWU but also holding the position of a Government senator, openly supported the workers struggle against his own government. Since the PPP became the government in Guyana itself, the union movement seems to have been given a fresh lease of life. The militant action of workers have been forcing leaders to act independent of their political leanings. The increase incidence of strikes in the sugar industry, which place workers against their own government, reflect a new thinking amongst the Guyanese workers.

This supports Waterman's argument (1981: 91) that 'the common *tendencies* discovered across the third world do not imply a common *situation*.' In other words, despite objective pressures and constraints there is some scope for choice by third world unions. As the thesis has shown, at a number of decisive moments there were alternative options available. This indicates that members and leaders of unions in post-colonial societies are not simply victims of circumstance but to some extent can influence their own fate.

Before dealing with the consequences of the politicization of unions in Guyana, it is appropriate to mention that several notable writers, Marxists/ Leninists in particular, have viewed the involvement of unions in political struggles as part of a class struggle (Kelly, 1988). The role of trade unions, they argue, is to work side by side with political parties to bring about revolutionary change, namely the overthrow of the capitalist system and to replace this with socialism. These ideas took on a particular significance in countries where unions and political parties became involved in struggles for national liberation, such as Guyana. In these particular circumstances

political dominance can come to be justified in terms of national liberation, as socialist movements and unions are subordinated to this goal. However, such developments do not justify the argument that trade unions have no independent role. Workers continue to face subordination and exploitation. In such circumstances, trade unions must distance themselves from such formal dominance and begin to defend workers' interests, though as this thesis shows this can be a long and hard struggle.

It is, then, the question of the political affiliation of unions which is central to the developments documented in this thesis. As is seen in the Guyana context, when unions abandoned workers' struggles while remaining loyal to political parties, the consequences were the destruction of the collective bargaining process and its replacement with centralized bargaining under the control of a puppet labour movement. Guyana has thus been characterised by an inter-linkage between party and labour leaderships and the domination of political and economic life by political personalities and employers' organisations, while workers' celebrations such as May 1st have been 'hijacked'. This politicisation of the labour movement in partisan ways has had major organisational consequences. It has resulted in the failure by unions to prepare accounts and reports to their members, the submission of inaccurate membership records, the failure to have or to articulate distinct bargaining positions and a lack of knowledge of the labour statutes and practices. Moreover, by being affiliated to the ruling party, unions benefitted from concessionary loans and mortgage facilities from state banks, scholarships and overseas travel. These were all used to encourage a dependency on party influence rather than on the vigour of the union to promote workers' interests. Additionally union recognition was used by the government to promote particular unions against the will of the workers. The granting of the agency shop was used to guarantee funding to those unions affiliated to the ruling party, while the paper unions which were encouraged were allegedly given funding by the Government especially to pay affiliation fees to the TUC.

The unions were trapped by these dependent relationships. As the political and economic crises deepened, the unions began to distance themselves from their former enthusiastic support for the ruling party. However, because of their institutional

dependency (unpaid loans, mortgages, scholarships, etc.), they were unable to assume independent and militant positions. The situation became even more awkward for the unions because members who were not supportive of the political party, and who were never made to feel welcome or at home with the union, did not trust the leaders and would never venture to support any position taken by them, even though it might have been a genuinely solid workers' position. One union, the GWU, which openly criticised the ruling party to which it was affiliated and then withdrew affiliation from the party, received a cruel lesson when it lost its Headquarters and was evicted from the premises in an unconventional manner. Its officers were victimised, and one was served with a foreclosure notice on mortgage arrears for his house, while union dues remittances were unduly delayed. In effect the ruling party was signalling to others the consequences of betrayal. Nonetheless, the GWU stood its ground and is now trying to rebuild a union with a new outlook.

In regard to the affiliation or close ties which exist between the PPP and GAWU, it is apparent that industrial actions were timed to coincide with party events and timetables rather than the workers' interests in such instances as the 1964, 1977 and 1989 strikes. What is clear in the Guyana context is the degree to which political parties in opposition have used workers in protest action to undermine the national economy for political mileage. This took place with the PNC when they were in opposition in the early 1960s, and it was also adopted by the PPP when it was in opposition. The point should be made that many of these industrial actions were justified in the sense that they were necessary to pursue industrial grievances, but the timing and manner of their pursuit revealed ulterior motives, which clearly reflected partisan political interest. Furthermore, the main political parties in Guyana never attempted to work on issues together to promote national development, in a way which would have served workers' interests.

The powerlessness produced by party affiliation within the labour movement served to discredit the movement in the eyes of many workers, who did not see their real interests as being served by the unions. Many unions, for their part, became disenchanted with the PNC, because its policies were far removed from workers'

interest, but did not know how to get out of the trap they had been drawn into by that party. The movement therefore became weakened and disoriented under the present system of party affiliation. The emphasis seems to have been placed on controlling the movement rather than defending the rights of the workers. So long as this situation continues the movement will continue to decline. If other leaders, with close ties to another party, were to take the reins of power, there are no grounds for believing that this would end the polarisation of the union movement. Those who have opposed the idea of unions being affiliated to political parties need to continue to press for a strong, independent and united labour movement, with the right to make political demands where necessary.

While managements' views on wild cat strikes and violation of agreements may have been partly justified, the responses by management have been experienced as arbitrary. Workers have alluded to what they perceived as high-handed approaches by management on these issues. The records reflect the rich legacy of the struggles of sugar workers against exploitative working practises under centuries of foreign domination and later a ruinous 'dictatorship'. What is also clear from the tables on production, is that there were years when workers' best efforts went unrewarded. They were given little bonus and no profit sharing, because prices were paid at the international levels determined by other external agencies. At times prices paid for sugar were insufficient to meet the cost of production. This is a major problem confronting agricultural workers and producers in developing countries.

The inefficiency of factories also led to less sugar being produced, although more canes were harvested. Workers were therefore penalised for a situation not of their own making. It could be argued that the bonus system should have been changed to reflect the actual labour and efforts by workers, with payment based on the tons of cane harvested, instead of tons of sugar produced. In such an assessment the struggles of Guyanese sugar workers should not be seen in isolation since their sisters and brothers world wide also have bitter stories to tell, of misery, oppression and exploitation. In addressing the problems of sugar workers in the Philippines this is how one delegate described their life to an international sugar conference:

In the sugar land the scales of justice lie broken and overturned, the workers groan pitifully under the almost unbearable load of oppression. But, there must come a day when these people can no longer endure their suffering and degradation. If the day of justice does not dawn with sharing, equality and brotherhood, it may well be ushered in with blood ( The World of Sugar Workers 1977: 82).

It is not claiming too much to state that the Guyanese sugar workers have paid in blood while struggling for change. One possible solution would be for the international trade union movement to adopt a more meaningful role in seeking to redress the wrongs committed against workers by employers, and especially by the state as employer. However, there are difficulties in pursuing such policies, not least because the international labour organisations, such as the ICFTU, have been difficult to influence.

One of the important lessons from this thesis concerns the role of unions in relation to economic policy. The emerging trend, in which national political parties are moving closer to market oriented economics, should also be given active study by the labour movement. The role of the labour movement in endorsing political parties should now be redefined. Many parties which in the past claimed to have the sympathy for the working class have turned a blind eye to assaults which have been committed by employers against the workers. In fact many Governments, supported by organised labour, have ended up attacking the movement and have sided with employers in their attacks on workers in the name of promoting investment opportunities. As this study has demonstrated, where unions are affiliated to these governing parties, it is likely that vigorous protests will be stifled.

A central implication of the thesis is that the use of aggressive methods by trade unions to build the working class movement should once again be resorted to, if the movement is going to raise the level of consciousness of the workers. The aggressiveness and militant approach taken by the NAACIE and GAWU unions in Guyana, despite the problems of 1989, earned them considerable support among workers. In fact, they continue to grow at the expense of other competing unions which have been noted for their inactivity. The same could be said of the Service

Employees International Union in the USA which, over the last 15 years under the leadership of John Sweeney, has doubled its membership “to 1.1 million members, in part through aggressive organizing drives that have sometimes used acts of civil disobedience to recruit low-paid women, minorities and immigrants” (Reuters, New York. October 25, 1995). This is in marked contrast to the massive decline of almost 50 per cent in union membership in the USA over the last 25 years. That image has no doubt helped to make Sweeney the President of the American Federation of Labour/Congress of Industrial Organisation (AFL-CIO) at its first contested elections in its forty year history.

It is not that this research is advocating indiscipline and unconventional working practices by organised labour. Far from that, trade unions ought to ensure that their members understand that management also have rights and that rules or procedures, which are agreed upon to determine the relations between the parties, should be observed. We have seen that frequent cases of violation of procedures in agreements for resolving conflicts in the sugar industry in Guyana have been an area of concern to the management. It does not make any sense for workers to embark on industrial protest action if there exist avenues for continued and speedy discussions. In this respect, the practice of striking first and then talking should be replaced instead by urgent consultation and mediation. This does not mean that workers should give up the option where they can exert some pressure or display their disgust over autocratic leaders or managers. This is necessary (Clegg 1970: 107) as a measure to keep the leaders in line. Furthermore, as Hyman argues:

collective bargaining is a meaningless ritual if nothing more is involved on the trade union side than the eloquence and statistical finesse of the official negotiators. For the employer can always ignore the union's case, however solidly documented and cogently argued, unless it is backed up by the possibility of sanctions. Serious negotiation involves the overt or implicit threat of collective action, the mobilisation of the power of the membership, if a satisfactory settlement is not achieved. Strikes and related sanctions are a vital weapon of the working class in pursuing its industrial objectives (1975: 189,190).

The spirit and intent of agreements are at times not clearly spelt out in the wording of

the agreement and care should be taken by the parties to ensure that misinterpretation does not lead to a situation in which conflict develops. In the case of Guyana, and especially in the sugar industry, many problems and strikes took place because of such misunderstandings. It is time the confrontational approach in seeking to settle industrial relations matters is put to an end by both sides of the bargaining table. However, unions should never lose sight of their main objective in furthering the interests of their members. This they must do with all the vigour and aggression at their disposal, especially in cases where employers display the 'might is right approach'.

Effective representation in Guyana would require the restoration of technical and leadership skills which political affiliation undermined in many unions. To reinstate those skills would further require the internal rehabilitation and strengthening of the technical capacity of union leaders, both nationally and locally in the fields and factories, where trade union life is rooted. Effective representation requires more than a mentality of either confrontation with the state, as a major employer of labour, or complete servility - two options which are open to forms of politicized unionism. What is needed is constructive and mature trade union involvement in reconstructing a ruined economy and for the improvement of the general standard of living of the workers. This may require unions having to take and support hard decisions from the workers' point of view. But, at present in Guyana, this degree of maturity does not exist at the level of the national movement, because the roots of unionism were transplanted from the field and factory and located in the political parties. The political parties which encouraged union affiliation must accept responsibility for encouraging a trend which has led to the debilitated and ineffectual unionism currently existing in Guyana.

Another feature which should be eliminated is the tendency to see party loyalty as a major factor in appointments at the managerial level in state entities. This has been the case with both the PNC and PPP in government. Freeing industrial management from the hold of the party is the first step towards some form of managerial regime in which economic rationality can be applied, without which there cannot be free play of

ideas or initiatives or divergence from the official line. Whenever the adversary in industrial disputes is also the same force which subjects the press, industrial management, the workers and the interests of the nation to its own power, then the reform of the labour movement is not an isolated issue. What is needed, then, is the freeing up of each of the sections to allow it to assert its autonomy, thus forcing the dominant party to loosen the hold which threatens to strangle genuine union activity. This freeing up process would allow for the creation of a vibrant and autonomous labour movement which can advocate change and reassert its role in society. In the past too much of the labour movement's energy was wasted on marginal or trivial issues, because it was caught up in a political agenda, political time table, and political personalities.

A free and independent labour movement could return to basics and ask some fundamental questions such as: is classical trade unionism and trade union action still meaningful at the present time, or what kind of leadership are workers really looking for? The lesson from this thesis is that genuine solidarity around workers' interests can develop once these questions are addressed. It is also desirable to have trade union democracy at every level in the movement. Through periodic elections the workers can choose the leaders they are comfortable with, and have the confidence in, to promote their interest. One thing is clear from the analysis of some of the major struggles of the workers in Guyana. This is that they have been initiated by the workers who found the situation intolerable, while leaders were very often failing them. The cohesive and multi-racial struggles which took place in 1989 in Guyana can act as a catalyst in forging real working class solidarity. It is a ripe moment for leaders to critically debate the future course of the labour movement.



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