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## **CLOTIL WALCOTT 1925–2007 — A TRIBUTE**

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### **Abstract**

In our lifetimes we sometimes have the privilege to live and walk with people of great vision and genius. Sometimes we recognize that greatness, sometimes we don't and even when we do, it often takes their passing for us to realize the fullness of their contribution. Clotil Walcott was one such person. Even though she was recognized many times over during her lifetime — how much more do we recognize her greatness now that she is no longer here with us. Clotil was an (extra) ordinary, working-class woman who attempted to bring before the public, the hardships and experiences of working women, both in their paid work and in their unwaged work which she knew first hand; she engaged in a continuous struggle to improve their working and living conditions. Clotil described herself as a grassroots woman and became in many ways the voice of the voiceless, never waiting for an invitation to attend an event or meeting related to workers' or women's rights.

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## **Introduction**

Clotil Walcott was born on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1925 in Wellington Street, St. Joseph. She lived there with her parents for six years until the family moved to Arima in search of employment. She first attended St. Joseph Roman Catholic School, then the Arima Roman Catholic School. In addition to the normal school curriculum, as was customary in those days, Clotil and a few of the other students were given extra lessons after school by the nun, in French and Latin. While at school, like most other youngsters she was very interested in sport — her favourites being cricket, rounders and athletics. At this time too she developed an interest in drawing and painting.

Her first work experience was in a dry goods store. However, unsatisfied with this type of employment, she left and began work at the Central Experimental Station at Centeno. A few years later she was among a group of workers at the Station who were made redundant. In February 1964, she began employment at the Cannings Poultry Processing Plant in Arima. This was a branch of the larger Cannings Group of Companies,<sup>1</sup> which included among its many subsidiaries, a chain of supermarkets, stationery stores, meat wholesalers, a soft drink and ice cream factory and many other businesses. According to Clotil, it was her bitter experiences with both the union and the employer while working with this company for fifteen years that helped to develop her interest in the oppression and exploitation of working women.

In 1965, Clotil Walcott began her activities in the Labour Movement by joining the Union of Commercial and Industrial Workers (U.C.I.W.). This union was eventually replaced as the representative for the Cannings workers and in 1967 she joined the National Union of Government and Federated Workers (N.U.G.F.W.). In her own words ...

I became particularly concern[ed] about the problems of the working women being oppressed and exploited; to do this effectively I discovered I had also to be conversant with the problems of male workers.

In order to increase her knowledge of the subject, she took an overseas correspondence course in Industrial Relations, gaining certificates in Trade Union Law, Shop Steward Duties, Industrial Negotiations, Industrial Law and Collective Bargaining. On March 13, 1974, she was elected shop steward by the union members in her department but was never allowed to fully serve these workers. During her tenure in office, she became painfully aware of the role of the union at the time which, according to her, supported the company against the workers. This they did by not standing by the terms of the Industrial

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<sup>1</sup> This is also part of the larger Neal and Massy Group of Companies.

Agreement. By September 10, 1974, she was, in her own words, “arbitrarily ejected” from the post. This information was conveyed to her in a letter from the Union executive dated October 3, 1974.

Although she had the support of the majority of the workers, an announcement was made stating that both the Divisional Manager of the Company *and* the President General of the Union did not want her to represent the workers. Despite the lack of a formal position, Clotil continued her work of supporting the workers. In the meantime, the company and the Union continued their campaign against her. In the factory, she was subjected to much discrimination and victimization, but her understanding of trade union law was a factor contributing to her continuing employment.

Despite all this, Clotil continued fighting, sending letters to the Union on behalf of workers, writing to the newspapers (which seldom published the letters) and writing to the Minister of Labour. Her activities in formal trade union work then shifted to other unions such as the Bank and General Workers Union (BGWU) and the Union of Ship Builders and Ship-Repairers (USSR).

Clotil had begun to participate actively in politics from about 1966. Initially this comprised mainly activities in electoral campaigns in support of people seeking political office. During the period 1969–1972, she became a member of NJAC — The National Joint Action Committee and participated in the Black Power and Black consciousness movement which swept the country, with its aims of “Black identity, Cultural, Social and Economic Improvement”. During the state of emergency she would take her daughter Ida, then 16 years of age, to visit the political detainees, supporting them by providing food, or when necessary, a hiding place. This no doubt contributed to Ida’s own continued commitment to the work her mother started. Commenting on this experience Clotil later observed, “yet we have not been able to come together sufficiently, to really examine our collective experience as black people in a struggle ...”

In 1974, Clotil along with her close friend and comrade Brother James Lynch, Salisha Ali and others established The National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) as a section of the Union of Ship Builders, Ship Repairers and Allied Workers Union (USSR). The bulletin announcing its formation stated, “Calling all persons serving in the capacity of cooks, kitchen helpers, maids, butlers, seamstresses, laundresses, barmen, babysitters, chauffeurs, messengers, yardmen and household assistants” — heralding the union’s concern with low-income workers, more generally, in addition to domestic workers, broadly defined.

During the election campaign of 1976, she supported the Democratic Action Congress (D.A.C.), a centre party, because in her own words:

I felt it my duty to find a platform through which I could influence a programme and promote the women's role in our society... I had the opportunity of encouraging one of the leading platform speakers Mrs. Jennifer Johnson of the D.A.C. to give prominence to both the international and local aspect of women's progressive programme.

Later she would shift her allegiance, as many trade unionists would, to the United Labour Front. In addition, she was also a member of the Trinidad and Tobago Peace Council, a branch of the World Peace Council, under the leadership of Dr. James Millette and sold copies of the newspaper *Moko* through the streets of Port of Spain, often using money from her own pocket to pay for papers that were not sold.

Driven by the failure to get her views aired in the press, Clotil did her own publishing. She taught herself to type with two fingers, and bought a typewriter. Using this she prepared stencils that were printed on Gestetner machines by friends and associates. On completion, these pamphlets were sold by Clotil herself at fifty cents each, around the town, at political meetings and at the parliament building. I remember seeing Clotil in Parliament with a pile of papers on her arm selling to all who were willing to purchase. This was the start of my admiration for her strength, courage and perseverance, qualities I wished I had more of. Four of these early publications dealt with her struggle at the Cannings Poultry Processing Plant and were entitled:-

1. The Exploitation of Working-Class Women -v- Cannings Ltd. Guilty? Part I.
2. A Woman's Fight — An example of Exploitation of The Working-Class Woman. Part II.
3. Women's Aim Now is to end Exploitation. Part III.

On May Day 1979, at a Trade Union Rally, she delivered a paper entitled:-

4. Working-Class Woman Speaks Out.

These four essays were published in a booklet entitled *Fight Back Says a Woman*, by the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, in the 1980s.

In 1980, Clotil was invited to attend an international conference on Women's Struggles and Research at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague in The Netherlands. That was an important turning point in her development. It was at this meeting that Clotil met Selma James and Wilmette Brown of the International Wages for Housework Campaign. Immediately the connection between the rights of domestic workers and the struggle for the recognition of women's unwaged domestic labour became clear and from henceforth a relationship would develop which would continue for close to thirty years. It was clear that both these movements were based on something which was so important, so obvious to us now but yet so under-recognised — the way in which the accepted, unwaged domestic labour of women in the home (namely housework and child-care) was taken for granted, not perceived as important, not valued and therefore paid very little or not at all.

This marked the beginning of a mutually beneficial relationship as well as Clotil's new career in international mobilisation and diplomacy. She would speak at conferences in Vienna, Austria; Turin, Italy; Nairobi Kenya; Beijing China; London in the United Kingdom as well as Kingston, Jamaica, to name a few. NUDE became the local representative of the International Wages for Housework Campaign

In 1982, NUDE registered as a union in its own right under the Trades Unions Ordinance, although to this day household assistants are not recognized as workers. Over its more than 25 years of existence, NUDE would continue the struggle for recognition of household workers as workers as well as a number of other struggles with which it was more successful. Based on the struggles of Clotil, NUDE and later her daughter Ida Le Blanc, the following developments were achieved:

1. The passing of the Minimum Wages and Terms and Conditions of Service for Household Assistants Order under the Minimum Wages Act Chapter 88:04:18–17, November 1982. This included minimum wages, a 44-hour work week; overtime rates for public holidays, maternity leave, vacation leave etc.
2. The passing of the Unremunerated Work Act, 1995 which allows for the counting of unwaged work in national statistics, the result of — among other things — numerous letters written by Clotil to the Prime Minister, The Minister of Labour, the Minister with responsibility for Women's Affairs and every other possible government ministry or department, culminating in the successful piloting of an Independent Member's Bill in Parliament by then Senator Diana Mahabir Wyatt. This made Trinidad and Tobago one of the first countries in the world to pass such legislation and the Trinidad and Tobago language was used as the model for the Beijing Declaration on Women.

As an activist on women's and labour issues Clotil did not need to be invited to attend a meeting or public event. As long as she felt it was relevant to her cause she would be there. Sometimes organisations would deliberately not invite her as they would be afraid of her public chastisement; if even she was officially on the programme, it was pointless to try to stop Clotil from speaking beyond the allotted time.

But Clotil was also a mother; a single mother of five children — three girls and two boys — Pearl, Ida and Merle, and Ben and Andrew. Clotil approached her work of mothering with the same seriousness and commitment as her politics or maybe it was the other way around. For many argue that it is the fire of mother's love that often inspires many strong and dedicated women activists to their self-sacrificing work. She would defend her children and grandchildren to the death as many would soon learn and, women's activist aside, woe betide any woman who mistreated or took advantage of her beloved son Ben. In all her doings, Clotil kept her children close to her and they loved and admired her. Never did they feel neglected by her as they came to understand and even participate in her struggle. In their childhood, they remember picking tonca beans on the Torrecilla Estate and filling crocus bags from as early as 4 a.m. After this they would bathe in the

river then go off to school — that is all of them except Pearl whom her mother would indulgently allow to continue bathing in the river.

Although poor and working-class, Clotil struggled with pride to keep her children well-fed, disciplined and happy. After Church and/or Sunday School on Sundays she would inspect the one good “Sunday best” to ensure that it was in good condition to be worn again; she would say “put my dress there” after checking for tears and any soiling. After this they would enjoy her Sunday red beans and other delights. When she relaxed as she did with family and friends it would be with her daily coffee, salt fish and provision with “plenty olive oil”.

Clotil was able to combine her political and trade union work with effective parenting by virtue of her location in the nurturing community of Mt. Pleasant Road, Arima. Therefore her home, which she strived always to keep clean and tidy — especially her well organized office at the back — would become an Open House for all who cared to enter; a home where her children and grandchildren preferred never to leave, and where she would preside as matriarch over the different generations. Neighbours would observe, coming and going over the years, important international visitors, representatives of the ILO such as Constance Thomas, the International Wages Housework campaigner Selma James and officials of other United Nations Bodies, trade union colleagues like Michael Als and Vincent Cabrera, women’s movement activists such as Claris Manswell, Gaietry Pargass, Rowena Kalloo, and international scholars and researchers like Janet Bauer and Marina Karides.

We need to thank the community of Mt. Pleasant Road (Wattley Circular) for providing this nurturing space to Clotil and her family to live, work and grow. We need also to thank Clotil’s family for allowing us to share so much of her time, vision, energy and intellect which allowed her to enrich all our lives in Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean and indeed the world.

What can we say of such a woman? I for one can go on and on but we would never have said enough. How can we honour her memory which has inspired so many of us? How can we keep her name alive for future generations to know and to revere? This is a conversation we still need to have. Clotil received many awards in recognition of her contributions. These include the following:

1. 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1984 - Bank and General Workers Union Grand Certificate of Honour for service and dedication to the trade union movement;
2. 1985 - The Star Citizen Award — Peoples’ Popular Movement;
3. 1991 - Servant and Hero of Labour Award — Council of Progressive Trade Unions (CPTU);
4. 1991 - Network of NGO’s for the Advancement of Women for her Outstanding Contribution to the Women’s Movement;

5. 8<sup>th</sup> March 1998 - Guardian Women of Trinidad and Tobago Award — for her sterling contributions to the social life of Trinidad and Tobago;
6. 1995 - The Partners of The Americas — in recognition of her 30 years of dedicated service which achieved recognition of the value of women's work;
7. 31<sup>st</sup> August 1998 - The Humming Bird Medal (silver) — for loyal and devoted service to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in the sphere of Trade Unionism;
8. 24<sup>th</sup> January 1999 - Woman of the Year — Women Working for Social Progress;
9. 2000 - Award from the Mayor, members of Council and the Burgesses of Arima for Community Service in Recognition of her Contribution towards the Development of Arima;
10. 8<sup>th</sup> March 2003 - Network of NGO's for the Advancement of Women — International Women's Day 2003, in recognition of her as a Pioneering Woman;
11. 8<sup>th</sup> March 2006 - Ministry of Community Development, Culture and Gender Affairs, in recognition of her contribution to the creation of legislation for the counting of unwaged work.

We can possibly think of many other ways to keep her memory alive but I think that what she would want more than anything else in the world would be the revision of the Industrial Relations Act to recognize household assistants as workers in Trinidad and Tobago — THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES.

*Rhoda Reddock*  
*St. Augustine*  
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