

## THE 1930s AGENDA AND OWTU

ADDRESS TO 70<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE OF THE OWTU, 15 JUNE 2007

Seventy years ago this month, militant demonstrations and strikes swept the oilbelt in southern Trinidad, rapidly escalating into island-wide protests which were, by far, the biggest such labour action ever seen in this country. We call them the Butler Riots after the main leader, TUB Butler. These were only part of a series of labour protests which took place up and down the region between 1934 and 1938, protests which have long been recognised by historians as a crucial watershed in the modern history of the Caribbean. Moreover, in the days and weeks which followed June 19 1937, several important trade unions, notably the OWTU, were founded by the labour activists behind the protests. OWTU was first formally registered on September 15, 1937. It was the child (now a venerable 70 years old) of the 1937 struggles, birthed in the worker protests against poverty, exploitation, racism and colonial neglect.

Anyone who studies the history of T&T (or the Caribbean) must recognise that it is incomprehensible without an examination of the history of labour: what were the different methods of labour control, how did the workers (and others) react to them and try to seize the initiative wherever possible? In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the working classes (broadly defined) have played a major role in the history of T&T. The struggles of 1937, and the unions which came out of them, helped to pave the way for the process of decolonisation and independence. It is true that the labour movement lost the political initiative during the Independence era, but it still played a crucial role in the development of the new nation, and although historians don't usually make prophecies, I think it's safe to say that organised labour will always be a key player.

And so June 19 must always resonate as a symbolic reminder of labour, its struggles, and its central place in our national narrative. It was A.C.Rienzi, OWTU's first president, who proposed as early as 1939 (speaking in the colonial legislative council) that June 19 should be made a public holiday. Interestingly, Captain Cipriani, the giant who had done so much for the local labour movement but who, by 1939, was quite out of touch with the workers, strongly opposed it. 'Every right-minded person in this Colony would like to forget June 19<sup>th</sup>. The birth of Trade Unionism does not date from June 19<sup>th</sup>. It dates from much further back, and all those who...have the best interest of the working class at heart would like to forget forever June 19<sup>th</sup> and are not asking for the making of a day for false heroes'. No doubt Cipriani's opposition made it easy for the colonial government of the day to reject Rienzi's request--especially as war loomed on the horizon and Butler was about to be locked up for the duration as a threat to Britain's wartime security (read her oil supplies). It was in 1972 that a PNM government under Eric Williams made June 19<sup>th</sup> Labour Day, replacing the internationally observed May 1<sup>st</sup>.

Your 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference theme is 'carrying forward the 1930s Agenda', and I was asked in particular to identify some of the elements of the early labour agenda that seem to be either unfulfilled, or under threat. I know for sure that it is not for me to lecture this (or any) audience about specific labour goals, achievements or agendas. I am not a trade unionist nor can I claim to be a social activist, and each of you is much better informed than I am on these matters. But I am a historian who has tried to study the nation's past, so I will share some general reflections about two broad areas of the '1930s Agenda' which seem to be still very salient today—which have been important all through the last 70 years. These two areas are class based politics, and equality and social justice.

## CLASS BASED POLITICS

For some time I've been interested in how different narratives of a nation's past develop and compete with each other—a process of contesting the past—and recently I wrote a paper on T&T national narratives. It struck me that most of the competing narratives could be described as ethnic or regional: There was a French Creole narrative, an Afro-Creole one (the one especially identified with the period of Independence and with Eric Williams), a Tobago one, Afrocentric and Indocentric narratives, even a 'Carib' or First Peoples narrative. What seems to be missing from popular conceptions of the nation's history today is a class based or labour narrative. Yet, such a narrative (that is, an interpretation of the nation's history) did develop in the past, especially in the interwar years (1919-39) and the period immediately after. Why has the class based narrative slipped from the national consciousness to the degree it has? May it be partly a reflection of the relative eclipse of class based politics over the last 40 or so years?

Now this is a very complicated business, and the reality is that the nation's working population has always been divided, or stratified, by ethnicity, politics and gender—among other things. In the real world there's no such thing as inevitable proletarian unity, any more than universal feminist sisterhood. It is only too obvious that ethnic divisions, above all between the two 'majority' ethnic groups, have been and are a reality of life here, cutting across efforts to develop class based movements; I don't have to belabour that point.

Moreover, class formation in a colonial society like T&T has been very uneven when compared to an older industrial society like Britain. When the OWTU and its sister unions were founded, you had a rural agro-proletariat (estate labourers), peasants with their own land, informal workers (hucksters, petty producers), casual and irregular and seasonal rural and urban workers, unwaged domestic and farm labourers (mostly women)—as well as wage workers in

the 'modern' industrial or urban sectors, like the oil and dock workers who were at the forefront of our early union development. And the kind of person who was the 'model' worker of 20<sup>th</sup>-century union development in the West—regularly employed, waged, in the modern sector, male—was probably a minority of the whole labour force. This had tremendous consequences for union development and for the subsequent emergence and success (or failure) of class based politics.

That situation was common to all the Caribbean territories, but T&T differed significantly from most of the other British ex-colonies in one important respect: the political party that took the country to Independence and dominated politics for the next 25 years was not a labour or union based party. It is well known that the policy of the early PNM, which means the policy of Williams, was to reject the idea of a union based party, or a party with a union wing, the kind of party dominated by union bloc votes as was the case of the British Labour Party in the 1950s and long after. Williams consistently avoided any formal affiliations with the organised labour movement. He courted selected union leaders and co-opted some into the party hierarchy, he appealed to working class voters (especially African-Trinidadians) independently of the unions to which they belonged. So the development of class based politics via a dominant labour based, or at least labour oriented party was not an option for T&T after 1956.

So I want to make it clear that I have no romantic or fuzzy notion that it should have been easy to develop class based political movements in modern T&T, far less to ensure their success in electoral terms. But I still want to make the point that, if one of the key 'agenda items' of 1937 might be said to be class based worker solidarity transcending the African-Indian divide, this remains very much unfinished business—despite heroic efforts by so many people, including especially generations of OWTU leaders from Butler and Rienzi to the present.

When we go back into the history, we can discern 'moments' when African-Indian labour unity, or at least co-operation, seemed to be developing. This was the case, on a limited scale, during the labour protests of 1918-20, just after World War 1, when strikes and demonstrations by African asphalt, oil and dock workers triggered off wider protests involving mainly Indian sugar and cocoa labourers. It continued in the interwar years when the TWA/TLP was the foremost labour organisation. Despite Cipriani's disdainful comments about June 19<sup>th</sup> which I quoted earlier, made in 1939, in his heyday as a labour champion (say 1919 to 1935) he and his organisation stood for worker solidarity. Yes, most TWA/TLP members were African, but he tried to attract Indian workers, and no doubt the fact that he was neither (ethnically 'neutral') may have helped. He co-opted two Indian politicians elected to the legislature as vice-presidents of the TWA, and of course Rienzi became an important TWA leader when he returned from Europe. Cipriani's overall political ideology was close to that of the British Labour Party's, and this kind of democratic socialism was a good ideological base for worker solidarity.

It's well known that the Butlerite movement was predominantly African Trinidadian, with an important 'small island immigrant' element. It's perhaps less well known that Butler strove (maybe erratically) for African-Indian unity all through his active political career, both symbolically, and politically. The Butler/Rienzi collaboration in 1937-39, the emergence of Rienzi (when Butler was in hiding or in jail) as president of both the OWTU and the new sugar union, seems to mark the zenith of class based worker solidarity transcending the ethnic divide. It was short-lived, it was perhaps mainly the result of specific events and crises, but it resonates symbolically as a moment of great promise in our history. To a lesser extent, perhaps, we see the same kind of potential in the immediate post-war years. After he was released from detention, Butler plunged back into the labour and political fray. He was in some ways a disruptive element in the union movement, defying the OWTU and creating his own union to

take workers away from it; but in his politics between 1946 and 1950 especially, he tried to forge alliances with prominent Indian politicians and with Tobago's A.P.T.James.

These 'moments' in the early history of labour politics in T&T which seemed to hold potential for class based, inter-racial politics, above all the events of 1937 whose 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary is being celebrated, are important to recall; but we must acknowledge that they were not sustained. For many reasons, the labour movement, with its commitment at least in principle to class based organisation, lost the political initiative in the post-World War 2 period (while continuing to develop as unions serving their members' interests). Personal rivalries and conflicts between key union leaders played a part in this. So did the machinations of employers and colonial officials, always nervous, especially in the post war years, about the prospect of a strong, united trade union sector. Cold War politics—the division of the world labour movement between unions aligned to the West, and those linked to the USSR—had something to do with it. Rienzi's withdrawal from political life in 1944, Butler's waning influence after 1950, didn't help. Several union based, or labour oriented political parties competed for the working class vote in the elections of 1946 and 1950, the first two held on the basis of adult suffrage; the worker vote was fragmented. And when the PNM appeared to contest the 1956 elections, it was able to win a narrow majority despite its explicit rejection both of formal union links and of socialism as an ideology. It held power for the next thirty years without reversing those policies.

Of course there have been many efforts to revive class based inter-racial politics since Independence. The Workers and Farmers Party of 1966 was one such, though its utter failure in the elections of that year was not a hopeful omen. In 1970, though the initiative in the Black Power Revolt was not taken by the unions, key union leaders like your own George Weekes soon became important actors. Indeed, it was union actions—the involvement in the Revolt of Weekes and other labour leaders based in the strategic industries, and the incipient alliance

between them and dissident sugar workers—which prompted Williams to take the movement seriously. While it has to be admitted that the great majority of Indo-Trinidadians were not supporters of the Revolt (neither for that matter were many African-Trinidadians), both the union leaders, and the NJAC cadres, stood in principle for class based politics. The NJAC leaders always stressed that ‘Black’, for them, meant African and Indian, and the famous ‘March to Caroni’ symbolised the intention of interracial solidarity, even if it was not achieved in 1970. In 1976-77, the emergence of the ULF, with its mainly union based leadership, including the oil and sugar unions, was in principle a labour party standing for class based mobilisation. Its failure to win large numbers of African voters in the 1976 elections, its disintegration in the years after 1976, marked the defeat of (perhaps) the most promising of all the ‘labour parties’ formed since 1946. What the ULF did not do was to engage African and Indian workers and others, union members and non-unionised citizens, in day to day organised activity which could have prepared them for working together politically.

Since then, and I hope I am not being unduly pessimistic, the prospects for inter-racial political movements based on the working and middle classes do not seem to have improved. The reality does seem to be that ethnicity has been further entrenched as the major mode of political mobilisation in this country. So I think we can say that this 1937 ‘agenda item’ remains as yet unachieved. Sadly, I have no advice to give you on how it might be.

## EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The workers, the unemployed and other members of the broad masses of colonial T&T who took part in the events of 1937 were protesting poverty, very low wages, high levels of under- and unemployment, unfair labour practices, racism, a total lack of democracy, and government neglect and contempt. It should be said right away that—thanks in large measure to union

efforts—the material situation of the majority of the people has enormously improved. Most people in the country did benefit significantly from the period of economic growth after World War 2, from the oil boom of 1973-81, and from the current oil/natural gas driven boom. Union activities, along with government policies and general economic development (albeit uneven), have resulted in a marked rise in standards of living, and in the educational and health status of most citizens. And, of course, formal colonialism was ended, T&T has sustained a robustly democratic political system, our record of respecting human rights is better than in many places, and anti-black racism has retreated. All these are real achievements, and the labour movement played a major role in bringing them about.

Workers in the ‘modern’ sector of the economy, especially in the oil and related industries, have especially been beneficiaries of these developments. By the 1960s, it was clear that these workers (many of them OWTU members) had won a relatively privileged position within the working class, and this continued to be the case in the following decades. Indeed, oil wages—thanks to the high degree of militancy and organisation of your union over the last 70 years—have sustained thousands of families, allowed a decent standard of living for many, educated thousands of children and grandchildren who became productive and often prosperous citizens thanks to the earnings of oil workers. Oil wages have played a significant role in building up the social and human capital of this country; and oil employment generally has greatly helped to develop technical skills and expose citizens to the demands and challenges of the modern industrial world we live in. Again, these are very real achievements, much of the credit for which must go to OWTU (and other unions).

But we will all agree that, while some sectors of the organised working class such as oil workers did relatively well, especially during the periods of economic growth or boom, this coexisted with unequal income distribution, significant wage disparities across sectors and across the

rural/urban divide, and large enclaves of severe deprivation. If we can assume that the protesters of 1937 sought social justice and equity, not just higher wages for more privileged workers (and I think we can), we must concede that here is another agenda item as yet unfulfilled.

Moreover, the 'boom and bust' character of our 'open' oil and gas economy meant that even the more privileged workers (and others) suffered during the periods of recession, despite all the efforts of the unions to cushion their effects. During the recession of the 1980s, for instance, the whole labour movement faced a serious crisis, the result of cutbacks in the state sector, wage cuts or freezes in the public sector, retrenchment in the private sector and the collapse of businesses, and the overall increase in unemployment. Of course union membership declined significantly as a result, and the bargaining position of the unions did too.

The country recovered from the sharp recession of the 1980s, and is now in a second boom period, when unemployment is said to have reached its lowest rate ever. Yet income gaps seem to be as wide as ever, and real poverty in both rural and urban enclaves is only too obviously intractable, despite what I believe to be genuine efforts by the government to address it. These enclaves of deprivation seem to cross both the ethnic, and the rural/urban divides. As we watch on our TV screens deprived citizens—whether in rural spots behind God's back or gritty urban ghettos—protesting for water or roads, burning tyres and erecting barricades, we can't miss the fact that they come in all ethnicities and ages and both sexes. Is it true that sufferers don't see race, as Stalin said? Why, as so many of us have asked, does such a wealthy little country have so many destitute people apparently trapped in inter-generational cycles of poverty and hopelessness, not to mention criminality?

Despite the boom, despite the good news about the official unemployment rate, why does there seem to be so much underemployment, why does the informal sector seem to be growing? And one also gets the impression (I have to say all these reflections are impressionistic, not based on hard data) that there has been some erosion of the 'old' middle class, the people based mainly in the public sector in white-collar, professional or paraprofessional occupations—so many of them members of oil workers' families. All in all, the many and real benefits won by important sectors of the working and middle strata have not been accompanied by greater equity in income distribution, or the reduction of hard-core poverty. This nation has not done very well in terms of social justice.

If this was indeed one of the aims of 1937, then the unions like yours committed to the 1930s agenda will continue to agitate for goals well beyond better wages and conditions for your own members—as OWTU has long been doing. What is sometimes called 'social movement unionism' may indeed be the most effective strategy. I understand by that phrase forging working, maybe ad hoc alliances between organised labour, and a wide range of other social, cultural, religious and political movements, all sharing some common ideals (though probably also holding very different views on many issues). I suppose these would be described as NGOs, and the issues to be agitated could range from environmental ones to women's causes to poverty and crime reduction. Perhaps these kinds of alliances between unions and other social movements, alliances which certainly existed at least since the 1980s if not before, may be more useful, or more feasible, than attempts to create a labour or socialist party for electoral purposes. As we have noted, these attempts—from the West Indian Independence Party in the 1950s, the WFP in the 196s, the ULF in the 1970s, the CLS and MOTION in the 1980s—have not been very successful so far, and the prospects for the future don't seem promising, at least in the short term.

Perhaps, then, the struggle for the agenda item of social justice can best be pursued by alliances (maybe temporary) and links between unions like the OWTU, and other organisations with the same goals, to bring in non-unionised sections of the working class, and middle stratum 'progressive' sectors and associations. Of course this could also include governmental bodies and private sector organisations, and the alliances would no doubt shift and change depending on specific issues and circumstances.

If this kind of social movement unionism continues to develop, I believe that the OWTU will inevitably have a major role to play. This is not only because it is historically our best organised, and most powerful trade union. It is because, in my view, the OWTU has always contributed key intellectual capital to the causes it champions and the organisations it works with. It has always been committed to public education, informed debate, relevant research and the life of the mind (as well as the body!) Its contribution to the struggle for equity and social justice, a key 1937 agenda item, has been and will be, I believe, as much intellectual as organisational or financial.

Thank you for listening so patiently to these reflections of an outsider—but also an admirer.

Bridget Brereton

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