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# The History of Socialism in the English-speaking Caribbean

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## **Abstract**

Socialism in the English-speaking Caribbean has a long history. Its antecedents can be traced to the late nineteenth century. In the 1920s, Caribbean politics were driven by socialist ideas and socialist leaders. By the mid-1930s, powerful mass movements emerged in most territories of the English-speaking region, organised and led by workers and socialists. This provided the basis for the independence movement, leading to independence in the 1960s and '70s. The emergence and development of socialism in the English-speaking Caribbean emerged from both class struggle and the struggle for self-determination, manifested in Caribbean nationalism and the anti-colonial struggles. This article shows the important role of mass movements on the streets demanding fundamental structural, economic and political change. These diverse socialist voices, organisations, parties and movements shared a common vision for an independent West Indian nation able to determine its own destiny on the principles of social and economic justice.

**Key words:** Socialism, Marxism, labour, trade unions

## **Introduction**

The struggle of labour in the English-speaking Caribbean to achieve a society able to determine its own destiny is a dynamic and exciting process. Not only did the English-speaking Caribbean produce great socialist theoreticians, it also produced varying models and approaches for achieving a socialist society within the Caribbean context. In mapping the history of this struggle, it is important to recognise that there are many different forms of socialism, such as the democratic socialism in Jamaica, cooperative socialism in Guyana or the blend of Marxist socialism and

democratic socialism in Grenada. But all these socialist movements had the fundamental aim of transforming the system of economic and social relations in the English-speaking Caribbean.

This account of Caribbean socialism, written as neoliberalism faces its greatest challenge, looks at the people who shaped this history, and at the conditions that gave rise to their limited and advanced socialist efforts. They aimed to create a socialist Caribbean as the logical stage in the bitter anti-colonial struggle. Whilst the aspirations and desire for the Caribbean self (the need to free itself from the Anglo-American Psycho-complex) are still in the embryonic stages, the Caribbean people face the challenges of the crisis in capitalism, the climate crisis and aggressive neoliberalism. This article looks at the dialectics of class formation, class struggle and class consciousness, and locates the history of socialism in the English-speaking Caribbean in the history of the West Indian society itself. The two cannot be disconnected.

### **The material conditions in the English-speaking Caribbean**

There is a significant body of literature that looks at the material conditions and the nature of the Caribbean economy. One of the most important analyses was that of Lloyd Best and Kari Levitt, who characterised it as a plantation economy. They stated that

It follows that the appropriate definition of the Caribbean economy must include all those areas in, around and near the Caribbean Sea which has, in the last 450 years, come under the influence of the sugar plantation and its characteristic culture and mode of social and economic organisation.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the plantations were originally established by early settlers, they grew into a widespread system of production that the newly emerging merchant class or, more specifically, the British capitalists would control and monopolise.

It can also be argued that the Caribbean economy was a form of primitive capital accumulation. The labour process on the plantation shared some characteristics with industrial capitalism,<sup>2</sup> and although slavery cannot be said to be a *mature* form of capitalism, this does not mean the nature of the society was not capitalist. Another vital distinction was colonialism as a system of Empire: colonialism and the consequent racism provided the context for much debate around whether capitalism can exist

without slavery or slavery without capitalism, colonialism without capitalism or capitalism without colonialism, slavery without colonialism or colonialism without slavery. The theatre and practical manifestation of these theoretical questions are found in the Caribbean experience.

Following the abolition of slavery in 1838, the extraction of the maximum surplus value meant extremely low wages that fell even below subsistence level. Besides wages, the reproduction of daily life was challenged by inadequate rights to land. Rent and taxes were high, as was unemployment. The legal and social restrictions on acquiring land led to the 'proletarianisation' of the newly freed slaves.

In response to these conditions, within a few months of emancipation workers engaged in mass action across the region in Grenada, Tobago, St Vincent, and Jamaica.<sup>3</sup> However, as the historian O. Nigel Bolland noted, the planter class depended more and more on the state to protect their interests,

The planters could rely on the machinery of state to enforce their property claims against those of the former slaves, but the Colonial Office sometimes balked at their efforts to force freed slaves to work on the plantations.<sup>4</sup>

The planter class then sought to address the labour question with a system of contract, indentured labour, which was a mechanism to reduce the price of labour-power, especially as the newly freed slaves were demanding what they considered to be just and equitable wages.

Another mechanism employed to constrain the remuneration and power of freed slaves and indentured labourers was the Metayage system, which was a system of crop cultivation in which the labourer got a portion of the produce. The planters maintained ownership of the estate and paid wages in kind. They shared the risks, expenses, and any profits with the labourers. Woodville Marshall argued that through this system there was an evolution of the 'metayer' class into a 'capitalist' peasant class. This system, therefore, created an indigenous capitalist class with whom Caribbean socialists would later have to contend. I argue that throughout the 1800s, capitalism was the prevailing economic system in the English-speaking Caribbean, and this is the starting point for understanding the history of socialism in the region.

It is also crucial to recognise the long history of resistance to exploitation and a deep-seated desire for liberty and freedom. This culture of resistance has persisted throughout the history of the region up until

recent times, and the efforts to advance socialism have found their place in this culture.

In Dominica, in June 1844, violent protests erupted against the taking of a census, which recently freed men and women believed was an attempt to re-enslave them. In Antigua, by the late 1850s, wages had fallen substantially, making it difficult for workers to reproduce their daily life. The port workers could take no more and attacked foreign workers, which escalated into a full-fledged riot and ended with the killing of eight rioters.<sup>5</sup>

In Jamaica, on 11 October 1865, the Morant Bay rebellion began, as a result of the newly created reserve army of unemployed and high cost of food and clothing, which left many Jamaicans in absolute destitution. Nine years later in 1876, the Belmanna Riots in Tobago started on 1 May as workers set fire to cane fields and violently clashed with police,<sup>6</sup> while that same year in Barbados the confederation rebellion broke out in attempt to overthrow the ruling elites.

These are just some examples of widespread post-emancipation labour protests across the British West Indies. The common thread in these protests was labour and the struggle by ex-slaves to demand more for their labour during a process of proletarianisation.

### **The early West Indian response to capitalism**

As imperialism developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first waves of working-class activity spread throughout the West Indies. Out of this emerged two trends: the Black Nationalism of Marcus Garvey in Jamaica and the Fabian Socialism of the Trinidad Workingmen's Association (TWA) in Trinidad and Tobago.

The early socialist organisations in the British West Indies took the form of Friendly Societies. These were first established in the early nineteenth century, but they really flourished towards the end of that century. Forming these societies was one of the strategies used to respond collectively to the post emancipation era. According to colonial reports of 1896 there were as many as sixty-nine friendly societies in Trinidad alone.<sup>7</sup> However, two better-known organisations that took the form of combinations were the Working Men's Reform Club (WMRC) and the Trinidad Workingmen's Association (TWA). The WMRC was founded by Charles Phillip in 1897, and much of its agitation was around the question of the wages for the labouring classes.<sup>8</sup> The TWA, which is often considered the first combination in the British West Indies, was also established in 1897, by Walter Mills.<sup>9</sup> The TWA modelled itself after the London Working

Men's Association. Alfred Richard became its leader in 1906,<sup>10</sup> and the TWA became a corresponding affiliate of the newly formed British Labour Party. The TWA developed relationships with the British Labour MPs Joseph Pointer, a socialist from the radical Independent Labour Party, and Thomas Summerbell, a Labour MP from 1906 to 1910.<sup>11</sup> The TWA continued to have a close association with the British Labour Party after the Great War. TWA General secretary Howard Bishop attended the Labour Party's Annual Conference in 1921, and in 1925 the TWA affiliated to the Labour and Socialist International.<sup>12</sup>

The early twentieth century was a period of major labour disturbances. At the end of 1905 there was a strike which developed into a large-scale rebellion in Guyana. One of the leading figures in that strike was Hubert Critchlow (1884-1958), who would go on to form what could be considered the Caribbean's first trade union, the British Guiana Labor Union (BGLU) in 1919. Ashton Chase, a longstanding socialist and labour activist in Guyana recalled participating in an initiation ceremony for new members of the BGLU which included singing the Red Flag.<sup>13</sup>

In Trinidad and Tobago, the 1919 waterfront strike levelled a major blow at the colonial authorities. The strike was started by dockworkers on 15 November 1919 and continued for two weeks.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to the TWA, it quickly spread throughout both islands of Trinidad and Tobago. Former soldiers from the Great War who had been exposed to rampant racism, radical ideas of socialist revolution 'and had felt the full weight of imperialism' played a key role in the strike. Its significance was well summarised by Bukka Rennie who stated that

The Waterfront Strike tells us that workers had developed the revolutionary spirit to struggle in their interests to change the status-quo.<sup>15</sup>

The *Trinidad Guardian*,<sup>16</sup> in an article entitled 'Why the Seditious Bill is Necessary' had claimed that there was a revolutionary plot to overthrow the government.<sup>17</sup> Following the 1919 General Strike, the colonial authorities moved quickly to compromise by allowing limited representative democracy and a break from Crown Colony rule. They also introduced very repressive measures such as sedition laws and outlawing strike action. The working class gained an opportunity to have representation in power, and Arthur Cipriani, labour leader of the TWA ran and won a seat in the Legislative Council. Cipriani was not particularly a radical socialist – he believed that it was necessary to bring labour and capital together to improve wages – but many of his reforms were consistent with

socialist demands such as trade union rights, the eight-hour workday etc. The other two key people who represented labour who ran and won seats in the Legislative Council were Timothy Roodal and Sarran Teelucksingh. All three often referred to themselves as 'socialist', promoting socialist policies and programmes.<sup>18</sup>

In Barbados, journalist Clennell Wickham (1895-1938) provided the theoretical framework for working-class organisation and political agitation.<sup>19</sup> Like Cipriani, his contemporary in Trinidad, Wickham had served in the Great War and developed anti-imperialist ideas. Upon his return to Barbados in 1919, he began writing for *The Herald* newspaper, edited by Clement A. Inniss. Wickham can be considered Barbados' first Marxist theoretician, but Charles Duncan O'Neale (1879-1936) was the person to bring socialist organisation to the island. While still at university, O'Neale became an active member of Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party. Following the model of Cipriani's TWA, O'Neale and Clennell Wickham founded the Democratic League in 1924. O'Neale had also organised a socialist forum to build working class consciousness,<sup>20</sup> but he recognised the need for a proper organisation, like the TWA, to advance the economic interests of the working class. He was therefore instrumental in the formation of the Barbados Workingmen Association in 1926.<sup>21</sup>

Cipriani in Trinidad certainly expected the British Labour Party to encourage the newly forming socialist organisation when he accompanied Labour MP Frederick Roberts on a visit to the British Guiana Labour Union in 1926.<sup>22</sup> However, the Labour Party paid little attention to the issues of the colonies or the socialist influence on agitation in the colonies. The Labour Party whilst in government did not introduce any significant reforms in the British West Indies.

The early socialist formations developed out of the tradition of labour in the broad sense. They were not trade unions as these existed in the United Kingdom, yet they were still the precursor to the modern trade union movement in the British West Indies. It cannot be overemphasised that these early twentieth-century organisations were dominated by ideas from British Labourism and Fabian socialism.

### **Garveyism and Socialism**

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was and still is a very controversial and contradictory character in the history of the British West Indies, but his ideas have had significant impact on the early mass movement. The People's Political Party (PPP) he founded in 1929 was Jamaica's first modern

political party. Whilst Garvey may not be considered a socialist, his party's demands for an eight-hour workday, a minimum wage, and land reform were consistent with socialist demands.

There is a current tendency to focus on the contradictions between Garveyism and socialism, but from the point of view of those who followed Garveyism at the time, the distinction does not appear as it does to contemporary commentators. Both movements were struggles for social and economic justice for the poor black masses. The difference lay in where the emphasis was placed. Garvey did not see the value of socialism as a critique of capitalism as, in his view, there were no black capitalists. To him, the socialist struggle was between white proletarians and white bourgeois. This did not prevent him from forging close alliances with the various socialist movements.

There have been many debates about the relationship between Marcus Garvey and socialism. But whether Garvey saw socialists as allies for opportunistic reasons, or as adversaries who sought to prevent the rise of black capitalists or use black workers for a white ideological agenda, Garveysim did have a deep influence on many of the working masses. The experience of facing racism and colonialism, and subjection to ideas of white dominance, led to the sense of exploitation being framed as a question of race rather than class.

The idea of organising around the question of bringing dignity to black people in a colonial context took root amongst the black masses, but it became clear that this was not the solution. Many who embraced the idea of change by way of ending colonialism went on to envisage the capitalist system being replaced by socialism. There were many who considered themselves Garveyites who later became socialist leaders.

### **Padmore, James and Jones**

As Earl Bousquet has pointed out, the Russian revolution of 1917 found support in the West Indies.<sup>23</sup> It affected early West Indian radicals and radicalised those who fought in the First World War. It brought a message of hope for many oppressed people the world over as it showed that revolutionary change was possible.<sup>24</sup> The Trinidadian scholar Rhoda Reddock observed that the impact of the Bolshevik revolution's call for international working class unity was felt even in Trinidad and Tobago.

Three major West Indian socialists, inspired in different ways by the Russian revolution in the early part of the twentieth century, went on to make a significant contribution to international socialism: George

Padmore, C.L.R. James and Claudia Jones from Trinidad and Tobago. George Padmore (1903-1959), who was a socialist and a Pan-Africanist, joined the Communist Party in the United States. He also worked closely with the Communist Party's American Negro Labour Congress.<sup>25</sup> In 1929, Padmore travelled to Moscow and reported on trade union activities among black workers in the US. Jerome Teelucksingh, who believed that Padmore had played a critical role in the independence movement, quoted him:

It is high time for the fundamental change in the political constitution of these Colonies along the road of self-determination. This is the task which history has placed on workers of the West Indies. It is the duty of British Socialists and Trade Unionists to help these Colonial Workers.<sup>26</sup>

Padmore's contribution was his capacity to raise the Pan-African question directly within the international socialist movement. This was the context in which he advocated for independence, bringing the idea of Pan-African socialism to the world stage. During his time in the CPUSA relations with the party became strained over the 'Negro Question'. Padmore played a crucial role in the development of the radical strand in black internationalism. This strand had a complex relationship with the Communist International which later led Padmore to retreat over the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist question. Nonetheless, Padmore's work had a significant impact on international colonial struggles.

C.L.R. James (1901-1989) is probably one of the best-known and towering figures in British West Indian socialism. Drawing on the Trotskyist tradition, Jamesian socialism was grounded in a belief and confidence that the mass movement has the capacity to chart its own destiny – that is, its capacity for self-government.

James made many contributions to the study of human society, especially with his remarkable work *The Black Jacobins*, published in 1938. The key theme of this book is self-organisation and socialism from below. Breaking with traditional views, James was able to use a Marxist analysis of the Haitian revolution which enabled him to bring out the key theme of self-organisation of the oppressed. He strongly believed that the masses have the capacity to self-organise or even govern, and coined the legendary phrase 'every cook can govern'. This later played a role in influencing Maurice Bishop.

In *The Black Jacobins* James explained the impact of economic forces on society and politics, the interconnection between the metropolitan



mass movement and colonial struggle, and the relationship between individual personalities and objective historical forces.<sup>27</sup> This Marxist text, with its dialectical analysis of a key historic event in the Caribbean, has been described as a 'landmark in West Indian intellectual development'.<sup>28</sup>

C.L.R. James later broke from the Trotskyist movement, a break captured in *The Invading Socialist Society* published by the 'Johnson-Forest Tendency' in 1947. James went from being a Trotskyist to an independent Marxist, developing his own theories of 'state capitalism', race and class, freedom and labour, and self-organisation of the masses. His theory of state capitalism can help us better understand what the later new West Indian nation states became in the post-independence era. The contradictions inherent in state capitalism fuelled much of the tensions between the various socialist tendencies in the English-speaking Caribbean.

Claudia Jones (1915-1964) was born in 1915 in Trinidad and Tobago. As Carole Boyce Davies, in the preface to a collection of Jones's writing, stated:

Claudia Jones was a black woman and a communist, clear about her ideological orientation, as she was about her identity as a black woman writing and doing political work simultaneously. She saw her 'activism through writing' as always linked to struggle for social change and the creation of equitable societies. She also saw the implementation of Marxism-Leninism as a practical possibility, in the realisation of a world in which resources were evenly distributed.<sup>29</sup>

Jones was a remarkable Caribbean socialist who is sometimes overlooked in terms of activism and even her theoretical contribution to socialism. She took an even more militant line – like Padmore and James she understood the tension between the race and class questions, but she also added gender. She also did not see them as opposite tensions but rather as dialectic tensions, not separate but related, and could be resolved only through communism. It is for this reason she played a critical role as a member of the Communist Party when she was living in the US. When she arrived in Britain in 1955 she saw West Indian culture as being a natural home for embracing ideas of fundamental change. It was in this spirit she helped establish the forerunners of the Notting Hill Carnival. This was in response to the race riots of 1958, and to resist Euro-American bourgeois aesthetics, imperialism and cultural hegemony, and political and racial oppression.<sup>30</sup> She saw the Carnival as a part of a political project to unite Caribbean people to create a sense of

community. For Jones, it was a resolution of race, class and gender in West Indian culture that could help the transition from capitalism to socialism. She also founded a newspaper, the *West Indian Gazette*, to share information on the successes of various struggles which helped raise consciousness among the British Caribbean community.

### **The labour unrest of the 1930s**

The literature on the labour unrest of the 1930s in the Caribbean often overlooks the role of socialists in these events. The region was feeling the effects of the capitalist crisis of the Great Depression. The economy was dominated by multinationals, which extracted maximum profit by keeping wages very low and providing extremely poor terms and conditions with no social benefits. The colonial authority provided only poor housing, health care and education facilities. Global capital sought to extract a double surplus by exploiting both natural resources and labour. The labour unrest which broke out was very widespread and included Belize, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, St Kitts, St Vincent, St Lucia, Barbados, Bahamas and Jamaica.<sup>31</sup> These events were not socialist revolutions, but they were certainly major rebellions that significantly changed the history of the working class in the English-speaking Caribbean and shaped the political future of the region.

In Belize, Antonio Soberanis Gómez, (1897-1975) along with John Lahoodie, Gabriel Adderly and Benjamin Reneau, formed the Labourers & Unemployed Association (LUA).<sup>32</sup> On 1 October 1934, LUA agitation led by Soberanis resulted in a series of riots as well as the arrest of seventeen LUA members, including Soberanis.<sup>33</sup> Rebellion also broke out in St Kitts the following year in January 1935. The unrest was led by the St Kitts Workers League (SWL) which had been formed in 1932 along the lines of the Grenada Workingmen's Association and the Trinidad Workingmen's Association. The SWL emerged from the first political organisation in St Kitts, which was the St Kitts-Nevis Universal Benevolent Association (SKNUBA) established around 1921. Its leading figures were J. Matthew Sebastian and J.A. Nathan. During the 1935 rebellion, a journalist on the colonial newspaper *St. Kitts Nevis Daily Bulletin*, E.J. Sheffield, commented on the leadership of SKNUBA:

For agitators to endeavour to incite the labouring classes to take it as a mere manifestation of the rabidity of their rather Bolshevistic tendencies.<sup>34</sup>

In St Vincent, on 21 October 1935, in response to the government's decision to increase customs duties, Vincentians took to the streets to petition the Governor. This led to rioting, in which three people were killed and twenty-six injured. The colonial state responded with extreme repression. This resulted in the formation of the St Vincent Workingmen's Association along similar lines as the Trinidad Workingmen's Association. A key leader was George McIntosh who, according to some reports, 'kept a portrait of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in his shop, wore a red tie, and held – on at least one occasion – a dinner in honour of the Russian Revolution'.<sup>35</sup> McIntosh was at the forefront of radical and progressive politics in St Vincent.

In Trinidad a rebellion broke out on 19 June 1937, led by Uriah 'Buzz' Butler (1897-1977). Although Butler was not a socialist, he did follow the tradition of the mid-nineteenth-century socialist charismatic preacher. Like Cipriani and O'Neale, he had fought in the Great War. Whilst Butler led activities in the south of Trinidad, the industrial base, Elma Francois and Adrian Cola Rienzi played crucial roles in mobilising central and north Trinidad. Adrian Cola Rienzi, (1905-1972) born Krishna Deonarine, had been elected President of the Southern branch of the TWA in 1925. His recent biographer Brinsley Samaroo has described him as a 'committed socialist',<sup>36</sup> who even made it obligatory for new members of the TWA to take an oath of allegiance to socialism.<sup>37</sup> Whilst studying law in Dublin, he joined the Irish section of the League Against Imperialism. In London, Rienzi became close to the Indian-born British communist and former MP Shapurji Saklatvala. Upon his return to Trinidad and Tobago in 1934, Rienzi joined with other leaders who would soon distance themselves from Cipriani and the TWA. He founded the Trinidad Citizen's League in 1935. Shortly after the June 1937 rebellion he became the first President General of both the Oilfields Workers' Trade Union (OWTU) and the All Sugar Estates and Factory Workers Trade Union. In 1938 he was elected the founding secretary of the Guianese and West Indies Labour Congress and led the Trinidad and Tobago Trade Unions Council (TUC) from 1938-1944. In his opening address at the 1938 British Guiana and West Indies Labour Congress Rienzi noted the failure of capitalism and said that 'calls for self-government and federation were not as important as that for a change from capitalism to socialism'.<sup>38</sup> In 1941 he became joint president, with fellow OWTU executive John Rojas, of the newly formed Trinidad and Tobago Socialist Party.<sup>39</sup>

The other prominent socialist figure was a woman named Elma Francois (1897-1944) who was born in St Vincent and moved to Trinidad

and Tobago in 1919, where she immediately joined the Trinidad Workingmen's Association (TWA). She, like Butler and Rienzi, became disappointed and disillusioned with Cipriani and left the TWA when it became the Trinidad Labour Party (TLP) in 1934 to form the National Unemployment Movement (NUM). Jim Headley, another founding member of NUM, was active in the Young Communist League in the US. The NUM came under the influence of Trinidadian Socialist Rupert Gittens, who was involved in the French Communist Party. In 1935 the NUM became the Negro Welfare and Cultural Social Association (NWCSEA). Other key figures included Jim Barrette, Christina King and Bertie Percival. The Marxist-oriented NWCSEA, though committed to the empowerment of people of African descent, also had Indian and Chinese members. Rhoda Reddock highlighted that the NWCSEA focus was self-government and socialist transformation.<sup>40</sup> The NWCSEA also had a clear policy on the organisation of women and provided a space for many militant women to engage in mobilising, educating and struggling in the poor urban communities throughout the north of Trinidad.

During the riots of 1937, the NWCSEA mobilised support for the striking oil workers and held meetings in the north of Trinidad. Following the 1937 labour unrests, Elma Francois became the first woman in the history of Trinidad and Tobago to be tried for sedition. Francois was one of several important and well-known socialist women leaders and organisers, like Daisy Crick, Eldica Alkins, Thelma Williams, Caroline Steele and Elizabeth Collymore, who played a crucial role in the labour unrest of the 1930s and the subsequent establishment of the modern trade union movement in Trinidad and Tobago.

With respect to Barbados, Hilary Beckles described the events of 1937 as 'Clement Payne's Revolution'.<sup>41</sup> Clement Payne (1904-1941) was born in Trinidad in 1904. In 1937, he led black Barbadians to resist the white planter class, organising several public meetings.<sup>42</sup> He and his associates such as Ulric McDonald Grant spoke openly of the need to overthrow what they called the 'capitalist element who is oppressing us'.<sup>43</sup> Because of his agitation, Payne was put under surveillance and was eventually charged with making a false statement. He was found guilty, and although he appealed the conviction and won, on 26 July 1937 he was ordered to leave the country. This led to four days of rioting in which the police killed fourteen demonstrators.<sup>44</sup>

A succession of disturbances and strikes broke out in Jamaica, in August 1937, and the following year, disturbances flared up again leading to a general strike on the waterfront on 21 May 1938 and a strike of street

cleaners on 23 May. During these disturbances the Jamaica Workers and Trades Union (JWTU) was founded, led by Allan George St Claver Coombs and Hugh Clifford Buchanan. According to the historian O. Nigel Bolland, in 1937 Buchanan met with Richard Hart,<sup>45</sup> a founding member of the People's National Party (PNP) and one of the pioneers of Marxism in Jamaica. Several prominent Jamaican political figures emerged during this period of agitation, including PNP leader Norman Manley and his long-time rival Alexander Bustamante.

Many leaders of the 1937 revolt, such as Rienzi, Payne, Francois, Buchanan, McIntosh, and Soberanis, were socialists who played an important role in organising the working class into trade unions. While it is generally accepted that the labour unrest in the 1930s was a turning point in British West Indian history, there is less recognition of the role of socialists in leading the unrest. The 1930s unrest was revolutionary, in the sense that the people that led it were clear that democracy cannot be achieved without social and economic justice for the majority of the working people. As Bolland has argued, the labour unrest gave the British West Indies an example of linking the causes of workers' conditions with West Indian nationhood and democracy and the ultimate liberation of the oppressed class.<sup>46</sup>

### **The post-World War II era**

Coming out of the Second World War, the British Caribbean had to contend with colonial dominance, the arrogance of victory of the Western imperialist powers, the emergence of the Bretton Woods financial architecture, Keynesian Capitalism and the Cold War. The region was not spared the intrigue and the contradictions that embodied the era, which manifested itself in three phenomena: the rise of Marxist Socialism and bourgeois nationalism, the impact of the Cold War and the aggressive response from the imperialist powers to growing Caribbean socialism.

During this post-war era of Keynesian capitalism, the working class in the British West Indies continued to be very active in attempting to advance the agenda of self-determination and greater social justice.

#### *The Caribbean Labour Congress*

At the first Conference of the Caribbean Labour Congress (CLC) in 1945, Grantley Adams declared 'there is no hope for the West Indies unless they became a socialist Commonwealth', and went on to note that the delegates

were very concerned about the influence of the US. However, by 1948 the CLC began to split between the Left, led by Richard Hart, and the Right, led by Albert Gomes and Grantley Adams. The emergence of the Cold War directly impacted the labour movement. Following the 1946 elections in Trinidad and Tobago, the British Trade Union Congress sent an adviser to the colonies to promote 'responsible' trade unionism in opposition to the militant trade unionism of Butler and the radical socialist trade unionism of O'Connor and Rojas. The growing tensions between class-oriented and non-class-oriented trade unions, the state unionism of the Soviet bloc and the increasingly anti-imperialist position of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) led the US and British trade unions to leave WFTU and form their own International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1949.

The Caribbean Labour Congress stayed with the WFTU, mainly due to the strong socialist position taken by the Trinidad and Tobago Trades Union Council. However, with the intervention of the British TUC through its adviser Fred Dalley and the direct pressure placed on the colonies, several unions left the CLC and joined the Caribbean Division of the Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores (ORIT), a Latin-American Labour Union Federation established in 1951 and supported by the ICFTU. In Trinidad and Tobago, the oilfield workers (OWTU) and Federated Workers Trade Union (FWTU) objected strongly to Caribbean unions leaving the CLC and the WFTU. A radical regional body would not emerge again until 1971 with the formation of the Council of Progressive Trade Unions (CPTU). Today, only OWTU from Trinidad and Tobago and the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union (GAWU) remain active members of the WFTU.

### *A dream that was the West Indian Federation*

The demands of the 1930s rebellion included universal adult suffrage and self-government in the context of a West Indian Federation, which the masses and the leaders of the time believed was essential for achieving self-government. The Caribbean Council resolved in 1938 to call for a West Indian Federation, and working class and socialist thinkers and leaders like C.L.R. James and Clement Payne saw Federation as a response to colonialism, grounded on the idea of social and economic justice for ordinary working people and the poor. Twenty years later, on 3 January 1958, the West Indian Federation came into existence, but by this time there were new leaders and the left was much weaker. In the end a politically united

West Indies gave way to a growing insular bourgeois nationalism, which led to the Federation's demise just four years later, on 31 May 1962, and paved the way for the piecemeal independence of individual nation states.

### *The challenges for socialism in the cold war era*

A major challenge for the newly independent West Indian nation states was their integration into the global capitalist system. As colonies, they had already been part of the global system, but as independent nations, they had to balance, on the one hand, the promises of independence and the high expectations of the masses, and, on the other hand, becoming more entrenched into the global system. However, there was some basis for optimism as global capitalism was being challenged in the era of the civil rights movement and liberation movements across the continents. It was a time of revolutionary ferment against capitalism domestically and globally. Nevertheless, the colonial authorities retained their stranglehold on these newly independent states, and neo-colonial relations were established. The leaders that led their countries to independence like Errol Barrow in Barbados, Norman Manley in Jamaica, Eric Williams in Trinidad and Tobago and Forbes Burnham in Guyana, did so with an uneasy compromise with the capitalists internally and the imperialists externally. Much of their rhetoric leading up to independence was socialist and they enjoyed popular support, but that had to be tamed to secure independence.

Parliamentary elections and self-government modelled after the Westminster system undermined the ability of organised labour to influence class structure and class relations. Much of the tension between the various forms of socialism in the English-speaking Caribbean lay in the inherent contradiction in which colonial societies found themselves even as they emerged as independent small nation states, facing globalising capitalism and new forms of imperialism. Although many of the independence leaders considered themselves to be socialists and wanted to bring about a more just and humane Caribbean society, at the same time they had to contend with their local capitalists and try to tame global capital.

They tried various forms, entering into alliances and compromises, all the while trying to establish a Caribbean self in a capitalist world hostile to such aspirations. The anti-colonial and anti-racist struggle became intertwined with class struggle. But as bourgeois ideas took root and controlled the ideological arm (media, education, culture) of the new states, this resulted in the diverse socialisms of the English-speaking Caribbean. The

theoretical exposition of corporate and democratic socialism came into direct conflict with the political praxis of the parties that espoused these concepts. They had to contend with the reality of global capitalism and the collaboration between the local bourgeoisie and imperialist powers. The question was: how could newly independent states with small size, low levels of development and limited control of their rich resources undergo a socialist transformation without local capitalism becoming mature?

By the 1950s, the socialist-leaning organisations had been systematically weakened. The pressure from the Western imperialist powers and US influence in its so-called backyard was being felt throughout the region. The West Indian Independence Party collapsed, and the PNP in Jamaica expelled its leading Marxists Richard Hart, Frank Hill, Ken Hill and Arthur Henry. C.L.R. James left the People's National Movement, the ruling party in Trinidad and Tobago, and resigned as editor of its newspaper *The Nation*. In Guyana, the People's Progressive Party was split in 1958 and the Barbados Labour Party lost twenty-six key leaders who went on to form the Democratic Labour Party. Arguably, these shifts laid the groundwork for the granting of independence. Even as working class mass action and the influence of socialist leaders raised the consciousness of the mass of people for independence, it was only with the weakening of the left that the imperial powers felt ready to relinquish their direct control over the colonies.

In the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, there were socialist, anti-imperialist, democratic and progressive parties, movements, organisations and leaders engaging in political struggles across the English-Speaking Caribbean. But although socialism has even had some electoral influence in Barbados, Dominica, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Suriname, it has not resulted in any major structural changes in these countries.

### *Guyana and the three socialist strands*

Towards the end of 1946, the Political Affairs Committee was established in British Guiana as the first major Marxist-leaning political organisation.<sup>47</sup> In 1950 it merged with others to become the People's Progressive Party (PPP), led by Cheddi Jagan (1918-1997). In its first five years there was tension within the leadership and its base, as the party consisted of an amalgam of several traditions with Marxists, reformists and nationalists. The leadership of the PPP included socialist intellectuals like Rory Westmaas, Sydney King and the famous revolutionary poet, Martin



Carter. According to the historian Denis Benn: 'In terms of its ideology, the party embraced a wide range of ideological tendencies, ranging from genuine Marxists to reform-oriented socialists'.<sup>48</sup> Issues of race and class within colonial society were exploited by both the British imperial power and increasingly US imperial power in Central and South America and the Caribbean basin.

On 27 April 1953, Jagan became the first Marxist to be elected as a head of state not only in the Caribbean but across Latin America. However, just 133 days after Jagan came to power, the British, through Governor Alfred Savage, suspended the constitution and established a bourgeois transitional government of conservative politicians and business interests, which lasted until the next elections in 1957. This forced removal of an elected leader was the first such imperialist coup in the English-speaking Caribbean.

The PPP won the 1957 elections, but one of its founders, Forbes Burnham (1923-1985), who had run his own faction in the PPP since 1955, broke away from the party to form the People's National Congress (PNC). The PNC claimed to be a socialist force, but Burnham recognised that he could not win without the support of upper and middle class Afro-Guyanese allies. Following the 1964 elections the PNC forged an alliance with the capitalist United Force (UF), and with the support of the western imperialist powers, a PNC/UF government led Guyana to independence in 1966.

Guyana became a battleground for three contending visions of socialism. After losing elections in 1964 and 1968, Jagan announced in 1969 that he was transforming the PPP into a centralised Marxist-Leninist Party. According to Denis Benn, Jagan viewed ideology as critical for the anti-imperialist struggles and wanted to promote unity to create what he called 'a genuine socialist society'. The basic programme of the PPP was anti-imperialist, pro-democratic and pro-socialist.

Jagan and the PPP sought to combat racialised divisions within Guyana by intensifying the party's class position, but at the same time attempted to consolidate its political support by forging an alliance with the East Indian bourgeoisie and farmers. The next year, in February 1970, Burnham declared Guyana to be a Cooperative Republic, and attempted to create an economic and political system he called 'Co-operative Socialism'. As Benn noted, the PNC's ideological outlook 'was influenced by certain Marxist assumptions', and its 1975 congress was entitled 'Towards the Socialist Revolution'. Burnham proposed that the cooperative was the key mechanism for achieving socialism, but many considered the PNC's

adoption of some Marxist elements as opportunistic. In addition, in power Burnham played the race card and consolidated power through repression. He was opportunistically moving with the global tide of the 1970s, with the Non-aligned Movement and the New International Economic Order. However, the strength of the imperialist powers and capitalism's shift towards neoliberalism made it increasingly difficult for any country which sought a different path to development which was not entrenched in global capitalism.

Out of the malaise of Guyanese socialism a third and even more radical strand emerged, the Working People's Alliance (WPA) led by Walter Rodney (1942-1980), founded in 1974. Rodney was an academic, pan-African activist and strong critic of capitalism and colonialism, who had come to prominence in 1968 when the Jamaican government banned him from returning to his teaching position at the University of the West Indies in 1968. In protest, the students organised mass action leading to what became known as the Rodney riots. These riots were part of an emerging black consciousness movement in the Caribbean and helped inspire the 1970 Black Power Revolution in Trinidad and Tobago. Rodney's status as one of the most original Marxist thinkers from the Caribbean was secured by his 1972 book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.

The WPA itself was an amalgamation of several small radical groups, and its ideology originally was Marxism-Leninism with Rodney's unique interpretation. Other key figures were Clive Thomas, who used Marxist economics to analyse small dependent underdeveloped societies, and Rupert Roopnarine. Rodney was killed by a car bomb in Georgetown, Guyana in 1980; the PNC government was widely believed to have been complicit in the assassination.

### *Trinidad and Tobago*

Trinidad and Tobago, having achieved universal adult suffrage as a result of the labour unrests in 1937, held its first election on that basis in 1946. Almost all the parties involved were of the Left and labour leaning. They were the United Front, the Socialist Party of Trinidad and Tobago, the Trinidad Labour Party and the British Empire, Workers, Citizens' and Home Rule Party led by Uriah Butler. There was also another socialist-leaning party, the West Indian National Party (WINP), which had been founded by David (later Lord) Pitt. The WINP would later reorganise itself as the Caribbean Socialist Party under Patrick Solomon. The Caribbean Labour Congress at this time also had a Marxist socialist programme.

The close link between trade unionism and the political left was noted by the radical political and labour activist David Abdulah:

In Trinidad and Tobago in the late 1940s, the radical Workers' Freedom Movement led by John La Rose and Lennox Pierre joined with trade union leaders – John Rojas, President General of the OWTU; Quintin O'Connor leader of the Federated Workers' Union and Oli Mohammed of the All Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factory Workers' Trade Union to form the West Indian Independence Party.<sup>49</sup>

In 1952 an alliance was formed between Trade Union Congress representatives and the Marxist group Workers Freedom Movement, led by Jim Barratt, resulting in the establishment of the small, openly Marxist, West Indian Independence Party (WIIP). Its leadership included Lennox Pierre (Chairman), John Rojas (Vice-Chairman), John La Rose (Secretary) and Quintin O'Connor (Treasurer). However, following intervention from the US State Department and British TUC, Rojas from the OWTU and O'Connor, who was President of the Federated Workers Trade Union, were forced to resign. This led to a significant decline of the WIIP by 1953.

One of the most important organisations in Trinidad and Tobago socialism, from the post-war era to the present day has been the OWTU. This union has taken a socialist line from its earliest days, under its President Generals Adrian Cola Rienza, John Rojas and George Weekes. Both the Trade Union Council and the Socialist Party of Trinidad and Tobago, which participated in the 1946 general elections, were led by John Rojas. As the historian Ray Kiely has noted, in rhetoric at least, John Rojas consistently expressed his support for socialism and the Soviet Union. He was, however, averse to more militant action such as strikes.<sup>50</sup> This was not the case for George Weekes, (1921-1995), who believed the people should own and control the commanding heights of the economy, and worked to democratise the OWTU, for which he was elected President General in 1962. He immediately recognised the Cuban Revolution and sent delegations to Cuba every May Day, a tradition which continues today. Weekes was also one of the leaders and a candidate for the Workers and Farmers Party (WFP) formed in 1965. This party was led by C.L.R. James, who at the time was under house arrest by order of Eric Williams's government.

There were other, less well-known groups. The National Union of Freedom Fighters (NUFF) was a Marxist group active from May 1972 to November 1974, led by John Bedeau, Brian Jeffers and Guy Harewood. It emerged in the aftermath of Trinidad and Tobago's 'Black Power

Revolution' in 1970 which had failed to seize state power. NUFF felt that the solution was armed struggle, but came to a tragic end with the killing of eighteen of their members including the leaders Bedeau, Jeffers and Harewood. Another critical political formation in Trinidad and Tobago was the United Labour Front (ULF), formed in 1976 by an alliance of militant trade union leaders who ten years previously had been involved with the left-wing Workers and Farmers Party. Several other left-wing groups were part of this alliance such as the United National Independence Party, the New Beginning Movement, the National Liberation Movement and the National Movement for the Total Independence of Trinidad and Tobago (NAMOTI). ULF subsequently split with the more radical left leaving to form Motion for Social Movement (MOTION) in 1989 led by David Abdulah.

### *Jamaica and the 'Democratic Socialism' experiment*

The first Marxists in Jamaica are considered to be Allan G.S. Coombs and Hugh Clifford Buchanan who formed the Jamaica Workers and Tradesmen Union (JWTU) in 1936. Following the labour rebellion of 1938, Norman Manley (1893-1969) formed the People's National Party (PNP) in the tradition of British Fabian Socialism,<sup>51</sup> although Marxists like Frank Hill and Richard Hart also joined Manley's party.<sup>52</sup>

Other tendencies which emerged from the aftermath of the 1938 labour rebellion were less socialist. The key figure here was Alexander Bustamante (1884-1977) who transformed the JWTU to the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU). Upon his release from jail in 1943 he formed the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) to rival the PNP. The JLP soon compromised with the capitalist class and pursued a conservative reformist policy.<sup>53</sup> Bustamante entrenched this relationship with the signing of an agreement with the sugar manufacturers' association.

To counteract Bustamante's growing influence and control over the trade union movement, the PNP formed the Trade Union Council in 1943 which later became the Trade Union Congress in 1946. The JLP in its turn accused the PNP of being filled with radicals, socialists and communists.<sup>54</sup>

As Trevor Monroe has shown, the US and Britain were alert to the growing influence of socialism in the Caribbean. In relation to Jamaica, he noted that 'prior to March 1952, the Marxist or communist Left was becoming increasingly central to Jamaican politics',<sup>55</sup> and this included much of the leadership of the labour movement. He cited a US State Department dispatch of 23 December 1953:

Communism has been slowly and methodically setting in Jamaica the past year and has reached a point where it cannot be safely ignored ... Rather than let the situation get out of hand in Jamaica under regulatory measures, it appears desirable to outlaw communism outright.<sup>56</sup>

Under the pressure of the international anti-communist campaign during the Cold War the Marxist leaders of the JTUC were removed in 1952. The Jamaican professional middle class could not tolerate their radical views. The impact of the Cold War on the Caribbean Left in the 1950s should not be underestimated. Divisions in the JTUC first emerged over the question of affiliation to the WFTU, but the ousting of the Left leaders weakened the JTUC, and its role as a radical political force was eventually taken on by the National Workers Union.

Then in 1954, the leaders of the Marxist left were also expelled from the PNP: Richard Hart, Frank Hill, Ken Hill and Arthur Henry, collectively known as 'the four Hs'. This was the result of Manley and the PNP's compromise with capital, in the misguided belief that it could be co-opted to realise the PNP's socialist aims in government.<sup>57</sup> The PNP was in power in 1955 until 1962, and while Manley believed that overall control of the economy should be in the hands of the government, he underestimated the growing strength of global capitalism and the local bourgeoisie. The JLP, in contrast, had no difficulty conceding economic power to the capitalist class so long as the party maintained political power. The PNP therefore did not lead the country to independence. The JLP, with its very anti-communist posture, was a much more palatable partner for imperial Britain to grant independence.

In 1972, the PNP, now led by Norman Manley's son Michael, returned to power under the slogan of 'democratic socialism', seeking to advance the socialist ordering of society with a mixed economy. The PNP viewed their system of democratic socialism as the only system of social and economic organisation that is designed to make opportunities equal and open to all. They claimed to be attempting to develop an indigenous socialism in the Caribbean. They adopted a gradualist strategy of social change, but without fundamentally changing the relations of economic power. This left a space for the influence of global and local capitalism. However, even a moderate form of socialism was not tolerated by the US, and economic sabotage, combined with the PNP's own failure to unite small peasants, farm workers, urban wage earners, and casual labourers led to its defeat in the elections of 1980. Power passed to the anti-communist JLP, which collaborated with the new Reagan administration in the US.

The failure of the PNP's 'democratic socialism' gave rise to more radical alternatives. Trevor Munroe, previously associated with the Black Power paper *Abeng*, founded a Marxist-Leninist 'Workers' Liberation League', which in 1978, he, together with Elean Thomas, transformed into the Workers Party of Jamaica (WPJ). This was a Soviet-oriented Marxist-Leninist party which saw itself in the tradition of the 'four Hs' expelled from the PNP in the 1950s. Internal disputes over ideology and struggles within the WPJ led it to take on a more doctrinaire approach, and the party declined not long after the collapse of the Grenadian Revolution in 1983.

### *The smaller islands*

Socialist ideas and groups were also to be found on the smaller islands. A towering figure in Antigua was Tim Hector (1942-2002), who for decades opposed the corrupt rule of the Bird dynasty. In 1968 Hector founded the Antigua Caribbean Liberation Movement, a radical socialist and Pan-African political party inspired by C.L.R. James. He subsequently published a socialist newspaper, *The Outlet*, and finally an online column called 'Fan the Flame'. According to his biographer Paul Buhle, Hector's 'committed life, political and artistic, egalitarian and multi-racial is also a saga unto itself, a beacon for socialistic visions that many millions died seeking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.<sup>58</sup> On the island of St Lucia, George Odlum (1934-2003) was a prominent left leader from the 1970s until 2001. A group he had initiated, the St Lucia Forum, merged with the St Lucia Labour Party in 1974, and when it won the elections in 1979, Odlum became Deputy Prime Minister and had his first term as Foreign Minister. His support for the Grenada Revolution and friendliness towards Cuba caused the US to push for his dismissal. He returned as Foreign Minister in 1997, securing recognition of China and improved relations with Cuba. Another significant group on St Lucia was the Workers' Revolutionary Movement, founded in 1976 by a group of young socialists including the journalist Earl Bousquet, who later worked in Grenada during the revolutionary years.<sup>59</sup>

### *The Grenadian Revolution – a new hope lost*

The Grenada Revolution in 1979 can be considered one of the most significant events in the history of English-speaking Caribbean socialism.

It was not the first time that a Marxist socialist organisation had been in government – this had happened in Guyana in 1953 – but it was the first time that power had been taken by revolution. It was led by the New Jewel Movement (NJM), a Marxist-Leninist party, and it established a People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) led by Maurice Bishop (1944-1983) who became Prime Minister on 13 March 1979. The Grenadian Revolution was supposed to be the concrete realisation of the famous labour call 'let those who labour hold the reins', and it was a crucial turning point in Caribbean history. The economy of Grenada was reorganised, placing people, rather than profit, at the centre of their economic development. The PRG sought to build a society based on social justice, and focused its energies and resources towards health, education and housing. It aimed at a society free from dictatorship of the local bourgeoisie and foreign capital.

It was a real and genuine attempt to build a new society, socialism with Caribbean characteristics. Maurice Bishop was a revolutionary moulded in the tradition of the Marxism of C.L.R. James. This led to a conflict with the more dogmatic mis-interpretation of Marxism favoured by Bernard Coard and other hardliners, which culminated in the assassination of Maurice Bishop and other leading members of the PRG government on 16 October 1983. The main contradiction that led to the revolution's violent collapse revolves around a critical question for all Caribbean socialists: what kind of party is required to transform our post-colonial society to a socialist one? On one side there is the Jamesian model of a mass party with democratic structures imbedded within the communities, and on the other side there is a more Marxist-Leninist, vanguard party, line. Whilst both sides agreed on the need for socialist revolutionary change, it became clear that a conflict arose between Marxism as a dogma led by a vanguard and Marxism as a method led by a mass movement. Different socialists and Marxists throughout the region took positions on one side or the other. The conflict therefore could not be resolved since it was an inherent contradiction, which in Grenada led to a quick collapse of the revolution. These divisions also made it impossible to find a united socialist response to defend the revolution. This question of the means of achieving socialism in the English speaking Caribbean is still very relevant for today's Caribbean Marxists and socialists.

## Conclusion

O. Nigel Bolland made it clear that ‘the issue of labour, and specifically, of its control and exploitation is central in Caribbean social history’.<sup>60</sup> The history of socialism in the English-speaking Caribbean is a history of the mass movement, a history of a people’s struggle against European conquest, slavery, indentureship, colonialism, neo-colonialism, US imperialism and neoliberalism. It is the Caribbean people’s attempt as a new historical category to achieve self-realisation and self-determination.

The study of the socialist movement among Caribbean people is vital, and the history of class relations and class struggle is the crucial question. I contend that the internal class dynamic in the formation of organised labour itself produced strong resistance to any transition to socialism within the various territories and even within parties and organisations that declared themselves to be socialist. The major argument and justification for this resistance was the need for pragmatic solutions to the economic problems of individual countries. In effect, this meant the imposition of neoliberal measures, despite the fact that many of their economic problems stemmed not from the pursuit of socialist policies but rather from the growing strength of the local bourgeoisie and its alliances with foreign capital.

Socialism in the English-speaking Caribbean arose from the material conditions and contradictory forces in the region, even though, as James reminded us, we cannot ignore the personalities that contributed significantly to the development of socialism. The importance of these ideas in Caribbean thought was underlined by the analyses and critiques of Caribbean Marxism in a collection of articles edited by Folke Lindahl and Brian Meeks in 2001.<sup>61</sup> Events since the 2008/2009 capitalist crisis and the more general crisis of human civilisation can only underline the need for a renewed struggle for socialism.

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