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Title

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 12(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1982

DOI

10.5070/F7121017188

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WALTER RODNEY AND THE CURRENT
REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLES IN THE CARRIBEAN *

by

Yolamu R. Barongo

There is no other geographical region of the World that is so charged with revolutionary zeal and struggle more than the Carribean is today. But this is just not a phenomenon we are witnessing in our times alone. The people of the Carribean region have had a long history of colonial, imperialist and neo-colonial exploitation as well as a history of cultural subjugation. Their current struggle reflects and mirrors this history.

The history of the people of the region, the majority of whom are of African descent, is a very sad one. It is a history of slavery, of brutal violence, of rape and plunder of the small economies of the region by colonial and imperialist powers.

GENOCIDE AND SLAVERY

The initial imperialist powers that were responsible for these crimes and against whom the people of the Carribean struggled for centuries are mainly Britain and France. These are the capitalist powers that founded the various small islands in the Carribean, and Guyana on mainland South America, on the institution of slavery. Of the two powers, the United Kingdom controlled the largest number of the islands and countries in the region including Jamaica, Guyana, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago. During the period of slavery these colonial powers ravaged the small islands killing off the entire populations of indigenous Indians. They sucked the blood of their African slaves by forcing them to produce tropical agricultural commodities, mainly sugar, for the purpose of serving metropolitan industries and satisfying the appetites for tropical produce of their people. In return, the Carribean colonies became the dumping grounds of the manufactured commodities of metropolitan industries and in addition later, of surplus capitalist investment capital. Over the centuries, therefore, the Carribean countries became firmly integrated in the system of international capitalism with relations of unequal exchange well established.

It is within this matrix of absolute dependence, underdevelopment, capitalist exploitation, political domination and

* This paper was presented as a topic for the Symposium in memory of Walter Rodney organized by the Committee for Lectures, Symposia and Seminars, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Saturday 28th February, 1981.

cultural subordination that the countries of the Caribbean region were born at independence in the 1960s. Following the Second World War the United States of America became the dominant power in the international capitalist and imperialist system. In the Caribbean, as everywhere else, the United States assumed a position of a leading and formidable imperialist power.

When the colonial powers in the region granted independence to their former colonies, the United States immediately stepped in and arrogated to itself the role of policing the small, weak and poor countries of the region and determining their social, economic and political lives. The sinister activities of the United States in the region were heightened by the success of the Cuban revolution in the late 1950s. The perpetual fear of the United States of the possibility of another peoples' revolution in the region and its hallucinations over the spread of communism in the western hemisphere conspired to increase the imperialist determination of that country to keep the Caribbean region under the orbit of western capitalist control and political influence.

CONTINUING CLASS STRUGGLE

So, the current revolutionary struggles in the Caribbean are struggles against the centuries-old capitalist exploitation, political domination and cultural subjugation. They are struggles against imperialist domination particularly by the United States. It is a class struggle on a global basis. Today, the main contending classes in this struggle are, on the one hand, the metropolitan bourgeois classes -- the owners of the multinational companies and combines operating in the region -- who are assisted and shielded by American power and supported by the local comprador classes in each of the Caribbean states. On the other hand, there are the labouring classes of workers and peasants whose interests are generally neglected by puppet political elites. In short it is a struggle spearheaded by the exploited classes for their own emancipation from the grip of imperialism whose leading representative in the region is the United States of America.

It is within the ebbs and throbs of this continuing class struggle in the Caribbean that Walter Rodney emerged in the late 1960s as the leading activist and intellectual pillar of the working class movement throughout the region. And it is while he was vigorously waging this class struggle at the time of his prime, the time when the struggle of the underprivileged people appeared to be succeeding in his native country of Guyana, that imperialism conspired with the local enemy classes to liquidate the leader of the impending revolution.

It is indeed a paradox of great dimensions that Walter Rodney was killed in circumstances in which the Government of Guyana was highly implicated. To the casual observer, the Government of President L. F. S. Burnham in Guyana appears to be an active participant in the current revolutionary struggles that are going on in the Carribean. Like other major parties in Guyana, Burnham's Peoples' National Congress (PNC) party claims to be an ally of the working class. It professes (or does it masquerade?) a socialist ideology. Since becoming independent in 1966, Guyana, under the leadership of the PNC government, has witnessed a variety of seemingly well-intentioned programmes of socialist development. The government took controlling shares in the key industries of bauxite and sugar production. Worker and peasant cooperatives were organized to take control of the production and distribution of intermediate commodities. The private sector shrank, although some areas of the economy remained under the control of the powerful local capitalist class. But by and large, the extent of foreign control of the economy had outwardly been seriously narrowed and weakened by the middle of the 1970s.

In addition to the economic measures in the direction of socialist development, Burnham's government undertook to disseminate socialist values in society. The mass media became a forum for government anti-imperialist slogans and propaganda. The government ordered that everyone must officially and privately address one another as 'Comrade'. Burnham himself was crowned with the title of Comrade Leader. The constitution proclaimed the country as the Socialist Cooperative Republic of Guyana and boasted that Guyana was the first and only cooperative republic in the world.

All these socialist measures, appearances and symbols, introduced by Burnham's PNC government, put Guyana at the top of the league of the progressive anti-imperialist countries in the Carribean. It appeared inexplicable, therefore, that a radical working class movement led by the late Walter Rodney should have emerged to question and challenge the hegemony of Burnham's PNC government which, under normal circumstances, the working class movement should have regarded as a leftist ally in the struggle against the common enemy of imperialism.

WOLF IN SHEEP'S WOOL

The realities of the situation in Guyana however, are that President Burnham presides over a government and leads a party which, seen from the present tide of revolutionary upsurge in the Carribean, is inherently reactionary. Whatever socialist road Burnham and his government have travelled so far since coming into power, it is the revolutionary people of Guyana that have forced him to do so. Burnham has been willing to travel

that road that far because his ambition is to maintain himself and his party in power and he knows that he needs the support of the people in order to fulfill this ambition. But as far as his innermost persuasion and orientations are concerned, Burnham is not the socialist he pretends to be. He cannot therefore be expected to be the champion of working class interests. On the contrary, in very subtle ways, Burnham is a stooge of imperialism. The British and the Americans understood quite early that Burnham was about the only man in Guyana that was likely to look after their interests after the independence of the country. The Guyana workers and peasants had begun to see and realize this imperialist conspiracy under the intellectual and dynamic leadership of Walter Rodney. In order to silence the increasing consciousness of the workers or to slow down its tempo, imperialism had to conspire with its allies in Guyana to liquidate Rodney.

In order to be able to understand the nature of the leftist politics in Guyana and Burnham's socialist pretensions one has to go back a little into history beginning from the time of nationalist agitation for independence in the late 1940s and 1950s. This is a history whose dimensions cannot be accommodated in a short paper of this kind. The political tragedy of this period and the imperialist manoeuvres that were responsible for this tragedy are well documented in a book written by a leading Guyanese nationalist leader, Dr. Cheddi Jagan which was appropriately entitled *The West on Trial*.

Why did Cheddi Jagan put the West on trial? Precisely because it is the Western imperialist powers, Britain and the United States in particular, who conspired to install Burnham and his PNC party in power at the time when Guyana was heading for independence. It is the same powers that have maintained Burnham in power since the country became independent in 1966. It is these powers that manipulated Dr. Jagan's party -- the Peoples' Progressive Party (PPP) -- out of office after winning three pre-independence elections with massive working class support.

Since its inception in 1950, Dr. Jagan's Peoples' Progressive Party proclaimed itself a radical socialist party of the working class people. It was about the only nationalist party in the Caribbean at the time that declared war on colonial hegemony in the region and adopted an uncompromising stand against imperialism and the exploiting capitalist classes in Guyana. In short, the PPP was a vanguard party of the workers and peasants. Because the PPP was a mass party that was closely identified with the interests of the working class, the down-trodden and revolutionary people of Guyana responded by giving the party unflinching electoral support. As a result of the revolutionary support given to the party by the masses of Guyanese peasants

and workers, the party won three consecutive pre-independence elections in 1951, 1957 and 1961 which subsequently paved the road for the country's independence. When Burnham returned to Guyana in 1949 after completing a law course in London he was persuaded to join the Peoples' Progressive Party when it was launched in January 1950. Because of his good scholastic record and the fact that he was a Guyanese of African descent while Jagan, the leader of the party, was of Indian extraction, Burnham was made the Chairman of the newly formed PPP. This arrangement was intended to balance the ethnic leadership of the party for the total mobilization of the black and Indian ethnic groups under the revolutionary banner of the PPP. Burnham's ambitious designs to be leader of the party, however, led to a split of the party in 1955. From that year until 1958 when Burnham's present Peoples' National Congress Party was formed, there were two factions of the PPP, one led by Cheddi Jagan and the other by Burnham. Burnham's faction of the PPP, which later transformed itself into the PNC, was constituted and led by the right wing of the former PPP. The other faction led by Jagan remained truly radical, leftist and socialist in orientation and continued to enjoy the greatest support of the workers and peasants.

IMPERIALIST CONSPIRACY

It can be seen that since the time when Burnham parted company with Jagan in 1955 he stopped identifying himself with the interests of the working class movement. As a matter of fact he became openly anti-working class and anti-socialist. In an effort to win the elections of 1961, Burnham's PNC joined forces with an extremely right wing party, the United Force. In several of his electioneering rhetorics, Burnham constantly accused Jagan's PPP of being a party of the communists. It is during this time that Burnham revealed his true ideological colours -- of being essentially reactionary, anti-socialist and inwardly rightwing and pro-imperialism.

In order to be able to implement fully its total commitment against Western imperialism and class exploitation at home, Dr. Jagan's Peoples Progressive Party sought the friendship and cooperation of the anti-imperialist forces throughout the world. Accordingly, the party established and maintained close relationships with the Soviet Union and Cuba after the Castro revolution. In Guyana the various governments of the PPP, particularly those established after the 1957 and 1961 general elections, pursued vigorous pro-working class and anti-imperialist policies which frightened the imperialist powers and the local capitalist classes in Guyana. So, although it had been agreed at the 1960 London Conference on the independence of the country that any party that won the 1961 elections would lead Guyana into independence, Britain, at the insistence of the United States, postponed the granting of independence scheduled in 1964

and required that another general election be held before independence was granted in 1966. The fears of the United States were that if full sovereignty was to be granted while the country was under the control of Jagan's PPP government, Guyana was likely to become the second communist country, after Cuba, in the western hemisphere.

It was precisely because of the conspiracy of the United States and Britain to stop Dr. Jagan's revolutionary working class party from leading Guyana into independence that Burnham came into focus as the darling of imperialism and the local capitalist classes. The United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) actively assisted Burnham's party. With the connivance of the administering power the CIA mounted activities intended to subvert the popular support of the PPP and boost the image of Burnham and his party. The British colonial power manipulated the established electoral system in the country in order to ensure a Burnham victory at the independence elections scheduled for 1964. In spite of all these imperialist manoeuvres however, the PPP emerged as the largest party in parliament after the November 1964 elections but short of an overall majority. Against all U.K. conventions, the Governor asked Burnham, whose PNC party came in second, to form a minority government with the backing of the ultra-conservative pro-business United Force party. Thus the platform on which Burnham came into power in Guyana was a platform that was built, propped up and supported by imperialist intrigue and conspiracy against the working class movement. At last U.S. imperialism had succeeded to keep the true revolutionary party of the people out of power. From 1964 up to this time Dr. Jagan's Peoples' Progressive Party has been kept out of power by Burnham's electoral manipulations and vote rigging that have had the blessing and backing of the imperialist powers.

Guyana entered into a period of sovereignty in May 1966, therefore, with a government whose concerns for the interests of the majority of the people was very much in doubt. Hardly any progressive Guyanese could fail to see the fact that Burnham presided over a puppet government that imperialism was determined to maintain almost indefinitely in power. Progressive and revolutionary forces in the country realized very clearly and quite early the great task and human sacrifice that lay ahead of them. In a statement responding to the British announcement of the date for independence, the Peoples' Progressive Party of Dr. Jagan alerted the people to the difficult times of struggle that they would be facing during the post-independence period. "For the Guyanese people," the party declared, "a new stage in their struggle for genuine independence has now been reached. The stage has now been set for the U.S.-sponsored neocolonialist regime (led by Burnham) to consolidate a Latin American type of dictatorship in Guyana. We must work hard." The party advised revolutionary forces in the country "to build a broad-based unity

for the attainment of a truly national democratic, anti-imperialist and socialist Guyana, and to keep and extend the rights and freedoms we have so far won." (Jagan, *The West on Trial*, 1966, p. 394).

REVOLUTIONARY MAJORITY

No one else, apparently, was more sensitive to the alien nature of the regime in power in Guyana than the leader of this regime -- Burnham himself. It was alien because, being basically reactionary and pro-imperialism it governed a people the majority of whom were revolutionary, anti-imperialist and socialist in their world outlook. In order to repair his image and that of his government and the party, Burnham became increasingly under pressure of conscience to move to the left. He therefore began stealing and actually implementing some of the PPP's socialist policy programs. This move was aimed at the need of his government to become acceptable in revolutionary Guyana as it was aimed at his pre-occupation with the need to erode the working class support for Dr. Jagan's Peoples' Progressive Party. Yet because Burnham was caught between two antagonistic and irreconcilable forces, his masquerading for socialism became increasingly glaring and hollow. On one hand, for the purposes of political expediency at home, he had to placate the masses yearning for socialism and emancipation from U.S. imperialism by appearing to them as if he was championing their cause. On the other, he knew quite well that he dared not implement genuine revolutionary programs that would upset the basic interests of his imperialist backers. Whatever he did, therefore, in the direction of socialism was basically of symbolic value than of actual substance.

These contradictions became increasingly sharp as the country progressed into independence. In the middle of the 1970s the Guyanese workers became disenchanted with Burnham's government, accusing it of selling out their interests to U.S. imperialism. By that time, Jagan's PPP had been so badly weakened by successive political harassment of its supporters and election rigging that it no longer was capable of mounting a serious challenge to Burnham's political hegemony. It was in these circumstances that the workers found it necessary to re-organize themselves under the Working Peoples' Alliance with a new, youthful and dynamic intellectual leadership.

The Working Peoples' Alliance (WPA) began as an organization for the political education of the workers and peasants. It had no formal leadership. But among the outstanding participants in its programs was Dr. Walter Rodney, who had returned to his homeland from a teaching tour in Africa at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. On his return to the country, Dr. Rodney immediately sought a teaching position at the University of Guyana

and, although the University Council was more than willing to offer the Chair in History to such an outstanding scholar as Dr. Rodney, the government of 'Comrade Leader' Burnham instructed the Council not to make the offer. Walter Rodney, therefore, had to remain unemployed in his home country to which he had been so eager to return and serve. He received many offers from the U.S., Canadian and African Universities but he refused to take them up, preferring to remain at home to offer his intellectual contribution to the revolutionary struggle of the working class against imperialism.

With the leadership of Walter Rodney and other intellectuals based at the University, among whom it should be mentioned was Clive Thomas, the renowned Guyanese political economist, the Working Peoples' Alliance became a very formidable working class organization to the extent that by the end of the 1970 decade it had replaced Jagan's Peoples' Progressive Party as a vanguard of the workers and peasants. Through seminars, rallies and publications the WPA exposed the hypocrisy of Burnham's socialist and revolutionary rhetorics. By the beginning of 1980, the government of 'Comrade Leader' Burnham and the entire plan of U.S. imperialism in the Carribean became threatened by the new dynamic revolutionary struggle spearheaded by the Working Peoples' Alliance of Guyana.

IMMORTALITY OF PEOPLES' HEROES

There is nothing that the government could have done to stop the impending revolution of the Guyanese workers except by employing the old heidous imperialist trick: liquidation of the leaders of the revolution. And so, Walter Rodney was killed in a bomb trap in which all the evidence available showed government involvement.

The death of Walter Rodney inflicted a heavy blow not only to the revolutionary struggle in Guyana and the Carribean but also to the anti-imperialist forces throughout the world. His death was not the triumph of Burnham, but of imperialism. All revolutionary and anti-imperialist forces in the world mourned the death of Walter Rodney. We are gathered today in painful memory of his death. However, although he is dead his revolutionary work lives on and THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES.

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