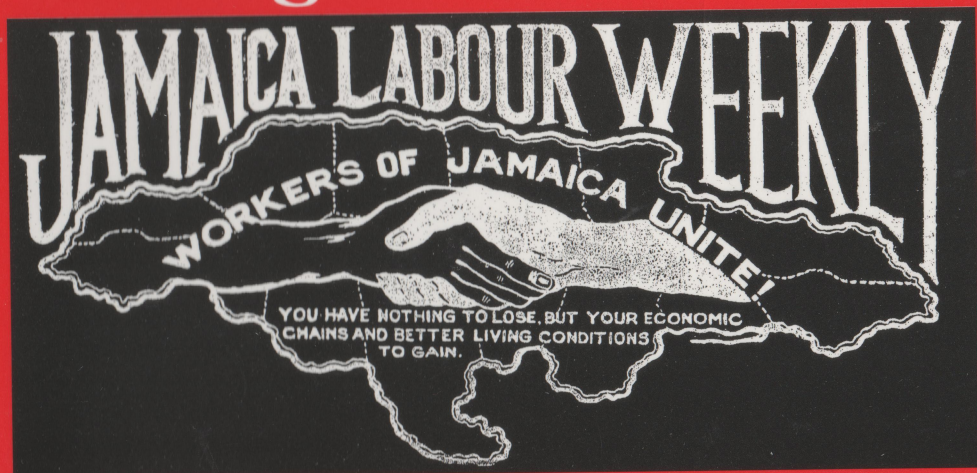




*Labour Rebellions
of the 1930s in
the British Caribbean
Region Colonies*



RICHARD HART

Caribbean Labour Solidarity/Socialist History Society
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LABOUR REBELLIONS OF THE 1930s IN THE BRITISH CARIBBEAN REGION COLONIES

**RICHARD HART
2002**

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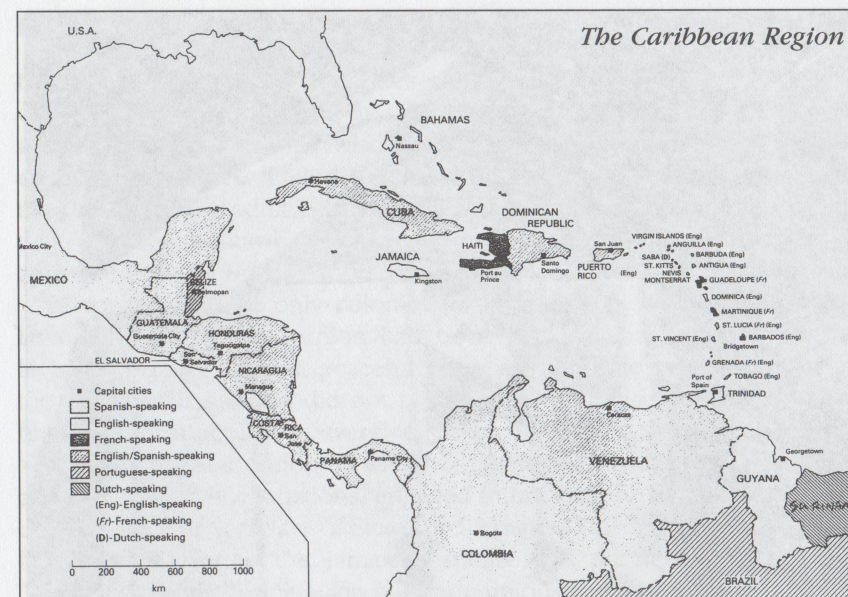
The British Caribbean Region Colonies

In the 1930s British colonies were spread right across the Caribbean region. In the west, on the Central American mainland, was Belize (then British Honduras). In the centre-north, some 600 miles east of Belize, lay the largest island Jamaica (100 miles south of Cuba), the tiny Cayman Islands (just off Cuba's south coast) and the chain of numerous small Bahama and Turks & Caicos Islands (off the northern coasts of Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Some 1000 miles to the east, forming the boundary of the Caribbean Sea, lay an arc of small islands stretching southwards from the British Virgin Islands for over 400 miles. These were, from north to south (separated mid-way by two French islands) St Kitts, Antigua, Montserrat, Dominica, St. Lucia and Grenada. About 100 miles to the east of this chain lay Barbados. 100 miles to the south (just off the northern coast of South America) lay the larger island of Trinidad and its associated small island Tobago. 150 miles to the south-east of Trinidad and just outside of the Caribbean Sea lay Guyana (then British Guiana), on the South American mainland.

Except in the two mainland territories, most of the numerous aboriginal inhabitants had perished within a relatively short time after they had discovered Columbus. Although they were not exterminated in the mainland colonies, in the islands only a few hundred descendants of the Amerindians have survived in Dominica and Trinidad. The overwhelming majority of the present day populations are descended, or partly descended, from the millions brought from West Africa to the region as slaves or the hundreds of thousands imported from India as indentured (contract) labourers after the abolition of slavery.

Populations and Class Structure

In 1936 the populations of these colonies, as recorded by the Colonial Office were: Jamaica – 1,138,558; Trinidad & Tobago – 412,783; Guyana – 332,898; Barbados – 188,294; the Windward Islands of Grenada, St Lucia and St Vincent (combined) – 209,846; the Leeward Islands (Antigua, St Kitts, Montserrat, British Virgin Islands) together with Dominica (later transferred to the Windward Islands colony) – 139,759.¹ The population of Belize, 98,453 in 1962,² was probably less than 80,000 in 1936. Although the mainland colonies were much larger than the islands, they were, except in their coastal areas, sparsely populated.



In Jamaica in the week ending 12 December 1942, 505,092 persons were classified as gainfully occupied. Of these 283,439 were wage earners of whom 88,981 were classified as unemployed. This did not include 50,528 between ages 15 and 24 who had never had a job. Classified as working on their own account were 153,274 persons. Included in this number were individual peasants or small farmers,³ but, because of the high level of unemployment, this category was abnormally large. This was because it included many enterprising persons seeking work but unable to get a job who had resorted to self-employment as a means of survival. Social structures in the other colonies were fairly similar.

In the colonies where the labour rebellions occurred, workers and unemployed workers who participated were to be found both in the urban centres and the other areas where the principal industries were located. In Antigua, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, St Kitts and Trinidad the largest employer of labour was the sugar industry. In Trinidad the oil industry, in Jamaica banana plantations and in Guyana bauxite production also employed many workers. In Belize the industry employing the largest number of workers was logging and lumber production.

1930s was having a residual effect internationally. The fact that the grievances caused by these factors existed in all these colonies explains why, despite the lack of inter-colony contacts, the labour rebellions of the 1930s were an inter-colony phenomenon, sweeping like a wave across the region.

An account of the origins and development of the Caribbean working class, published some years ago, gave the following description of the situation as it was at the beginning of the 1930s:

What appeared on the surface was a picture of general working class subservience and docility. Surveying the scene, colonial officials, representatives of the big foreign owned enterprises and the local employers and upper middle classes generally felt confident and secure. ... Sullen resentment and dissatisfaction were, nevertheless, swelling steadily among the working people and the unemployed in all the British colonies in the Caribbean area. By the middle years of the decade the situation was like a cauldron of liquid slowly coming to the boil, with isolated early warning bubbles here and there disturbing the apparently placid surface.⁴

The Early Warnings

The earliest manifestations of the growing unrest occurred in Belize, Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica. In Belize in February 1934 a group calling themselves the "Unemployed Brigade" emerged in Belize Town, then the capital. The Police Superintendent reported:

Leaders were appointed and a march round the town arranged. After the march the leaders met the Governor by appointment. The leaders were men of the artisan and labouring classes. ... The deputation represented to the Governor that their families were starving because the men could not get work.⁵

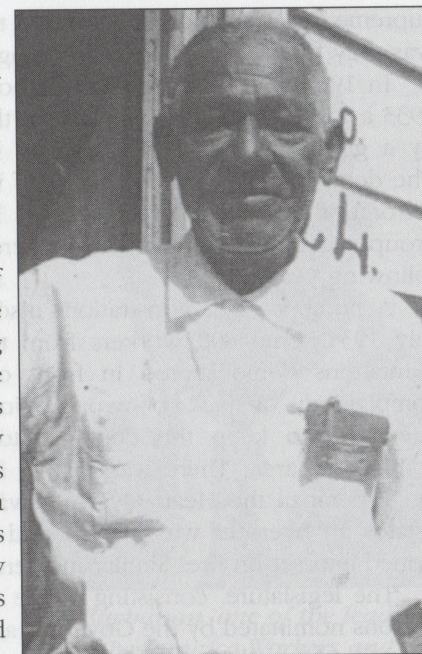
The Governor promised immediate relief for the hungry and announced that the unemployed should register at the Belize Town Board, but the deputation was not satisfied as they wanted a cash dole of \$1.00 per day. Nevertheless, 1,100 men and 300 women registered. It was at this point that Antonio Soberanis Gomez, a barber by trade who had been holding public meetings expressing popular dissatisfaction, denounced the leaders of the Unemployed Brigade as being insufficiently militant, and emerged as the most popular leader. He organised a petition demanding that the Government find work for the unemployed at \$1.50

per day. In August 1934 he led a protest march of about 3,000. In September he organised a strike of stevedores in Stan Creek, the second largest town, which won an increase of pay from 8 cents to 25 cents per hour.⁶

Soberanis continued to organise mass meetings in various parts of the country and played a decisive part in channelling the growing unrest into mass action. The Governor described his speeches as "offensive and inflammatory".⁷ New legislation prohibited processions without police permission and a Seditious Conspiracy Law was enacted so that, as the Attorney General explained, "Soberanis could be successfully prosecuted for sedition".⁸

In May 1935 there was a strike of Railway workers at Stan Creek, in the organisation of which Soberanis was involved. Police reinforcements were brought in from Belize City and the intimidated strikers returned to work. Soberanis was prosecuted for using seditious language at a public meeting on 1 October in Corozal. The Governor explained his reasons for selecting a particular Magistrate to conduct the trial: "One of my reasons for sending [Magistrate E A] Grant to try 'Tony' was that he was a black man. I did not want the trial to be a black v. white affair". He wanted, said the Governor, that Soberanis should be "put away for a good long sentence". Soberanis was also charged before the Supreme Court with attempting to "bring His Majesty into hatred, ridicule and contempt".

The trials of Soberanis aroused country-wide interest and workers contributed money to provide him with legal representation. All public meetings while the trials were in progress were prohibited. From the Governor's point of view however the results were unsatisfactory. The



Antonio Soberanis Gomez, one of the leaders of the working-class movement in Belize.

Supreme Court acquitted him and in the Magistrate's Court at Corozal he was only fined \$85 for using insulting words.⁹

In 1933 and 1934 there was labour unrest in Trinidad. On 19 June 1933 a hunger march took place in the capital Port of Spain, organised by a group calling themselves the National Unemployed Movement. The demonstrators demanded relief work for the unemployed and the restoration of rent controls which had been abandoned. The same group organised a similar, but larger march of some 400 to 500 in the following year.¹⁰

A number of demonstrations also occurred on sugar estates. On 6 July 1934 some 800 workers from the Brechin Castle and Esperanza plantations demonstrated in front of the warden's office at Couva, complaining of lack of work. Violence erupted when the police attempted to keep the demonstrators away from the business and commercial area. There was looting and twelve persons were arrested. On Esperanza the Head Overseer was attacked and injured. At Caroni Estates an overseer was injured and the offices of the company were stoned and set on fire. Similar incidents occurred on other plantations.¹¹

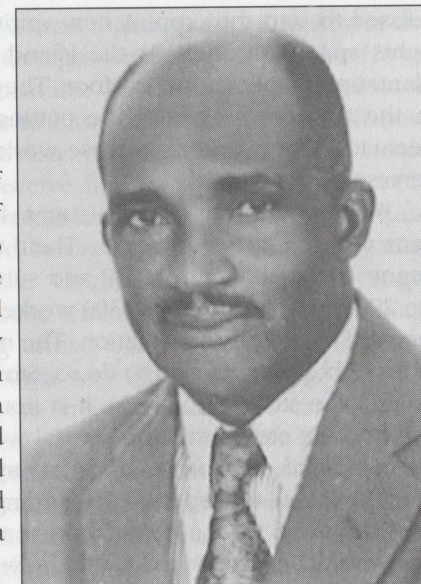
The legislature, consisting of the Governor presiding, 12 officials, 6 persons nominated by the Governor and only seven members elected on a restricted franchise, was sufficiently alarmed by the demonstrations to appoint a commission of enquiry.¹² In 1935 the Government also set up a Wages Advisory Board. One of the members appointed on this Board was Captain Arthur Cipriani, President of the TWA, which in 1934 he had re-named the Trinidad Labour Party.

In Guyana the workers on Plantation Leonora on West Coast, Demerara, came out on strike in September 1934. This was followed by a strike on Plantation Uitflugt, during which 2,000 workers converged on the factory to prevent the start of milling operations. No sooner had work resumed there than strikes occurred on two other Booker Brothers plantations – De Kinderen and Tuschen. Another strike occurred on Plantation Leonora in September 1935, in support of a demand that wages, which had been reduced by one penny in the shilling in 1930, be restored to the previous level. Other strikes in 1935 occurred at Plantations Vryheids Lust, La Bonne Intention, Enmore, Lusignan, Ogle and Farm.¹³

On 13 May 1935 a strike of workers loading bananas at Oracabessa in St. Mary, Jamaica, developed into what the newspaper *Plain Talk*, a new voice of protest edited by former Garveyite Alfred Mends, described

as a riot. The workers blocked the roads to prevent strike breakers from being brought in and cut power lines. Armed police were sent to the town from Kingston.¹⁴ On 21 May there was a strike of port workers in the town of Falmouth in Trelawny. This also developed into a riot when the use of strike breakers was threatened and one worker was killed by police gunshot.¹⁵ In Kingston, in that same month, banana loaders in the port went on strike and organised a march. On the second day of the strike the police opened fire on the crowd, wounding a woman.

In June 1935 the Jamaica Permanent Development Convention, a Garveyite organisation, held a public meeting at which it announced plans for the formation of a labour union. Nothing came of this proposal but, in May 1936, the Jamaica Workers and Tradesmens Union was launched with AGS Coombs as President and Hugh Clifford Buchanan as Secretary. Coombs, an ex-soldier and policeman, described himself as "a peasant of low birth, very limited education and a very poor man".¹⁶ Buchanan was a master mason and Jamaica's first active Marxist.¹⁷



HC Buchanan, one of the leaders of the Jamaica Workers and Tradesmens Union, 1936, editor of Jamaica Labour Weekly, and Jamaica's first active Marxist.

Sugar Workers Rebel in St Kitts in 1935

On 28 January 1935 cane cutters refused to start reaping the new sugar cane crop on the Shadwell plantation, on the outskirts of Basseterre, the capital of St Kitts. The employers had offered work at 8 pence (16 cents) per ton, a rate which the workers had been forced to accept under protest for reaping the previous years' crop. News of their refusal to work spread quickly to adjoining plantations where workers also

refused to start the crop. A new spirit of determination to fight for their rights spread throughout the island as groups of workers went from plantation to plantation on foot. They prevented work from starting or, in the few places where the cutting of canes had commenced, they persuaded the workers to cease work. A general strike of sugar workers very soon developed.

Workers at the island's sugar factory also came out on strike, demanding a wage increase. Their wages had been reduced by one penny in the shilling in 1930 and subsequently by a further one penny. On 29 January some 200 to 300 workers, some armed with sticks, entered the yard at Buckley's plantation. The manager and overseer ordered them to leave but they refused to do so. Stones were thrown and, either before or after the stone throwing – it is not clear when, the manager fired his gun into the crowd injuring several workers. Armed police arrived under the command of a former British Army major, but the workers refused to obey his order to disperse, demanding that the manager be arrested.

At about 6 p.m. a contingent from the local military force arrived at Buckleys. The crowd had by then swollen to four to five hundred. The Riot Act was read and the military fired into the crowd. Two labourers and the factory watchman were killed and eight others were wounded. Next day a British warship arrived and marines were landed. A period of intimidation followed. Thirty-nine strikers were arrested and six were sentenced to terms of imprisonment of from two to five years.¹⁸

The Labour Rebellion in St Vincent

In October 1935 the Governor of the Windward Islands arrived in St Vincent to preside over a meeting of the Legislative Council. At that time the Council consisted of a majority of colonial officials and persons nominated by the Governor, with only of a minority of members elected on the restricted franchise. On 15 October the Governor, in order to add to the Government's revenues, introduced a measure to increase customs duties on a number of items of popular consumption. It was also the Government's intention to maintain the high local tariff on sugar which had previously been imposed to assist the sugar producers at the consumers' expense. The legislature was scheduled to meet again on 21 October to approve the Governor's proposals and during the intervening week there was mounting opposition to these proposals which would increase the cost of living.

On the morning of 21 October a crowd gathered in Kingstown, the capital, in front of the shop of George McIntosh, a popular Town Councillor. They wanted him to inform the Governor of their opposition to the duty increases and to present to him their other grievances about lack of employment and general poverty. McIntosh informed the crowd that the Governor had agreed to receive him at 5 p.m., but they were suspicious that this was a trick to avoid hearing their grievances because His Excellency usually left the island before that hour, immediately after the last session of the Legislative Council. There was an angry demonstration outside the Court House where the Council was meeting, some of the demonstrators having armed themselves with sticks and stones. Some demonstrators forced their way into the building.

Windows of the Court House were smashed and motor cars of some officials were damaged. There were shouts of "We can't stand more duties on food or clothing" and cries of "We have no work. We are hungry". The alarmed Governor adjourned the session of the Council. As he and other officials emerged from the Council Chamber, the Governor was pushed and struck and the Attorney General, who had drafted the tax measures, was cuffed by an enraged protester. In the ensuing riot a crowd broke into the prison releasing the ten prisoners there and the business premises of F A Corea, a member of the Council and the island's largest merchant and plantation owner, were ransacked.

Following the arrival of an armed police force, the Riot Act was read and the crowd was fired upon. One person was killed and several were injured. News travels fast in a small island and the rioting soon spread to Georgetown, twenty miles to the south, and Chateaubelair the same distance to the north. Telephone wires were cut and several bridges were destroyed. Military "Volunteers" were rushed in from other islands and armed police and Volunteers were posted to guard the cable and wireless station and the electricity plant. At midnight on 21 October a British warship arrived. On 22 October a state of emergency was proclaimed.

Though the disorder in Kingstown had subsided by the end of the first day, disorders in the rural areas, where many plantation workers were involved, continued for the next two days. The police met particularly strong resistance at Byera's Hill, Campden Park and Stubbs, where demands for land and for higher wages were heard. The state of emergency was continued for three weeks.¹⁹

In Kingstown the working class leader who had played the principal agitational role was Sheriff Lewis. He was popularly known as "Selassie"

because of his advocacy of the cause of Ethiopia, then being invaded by Italy. Bertha Mutt, who was also mentioned in a similar role, was known as "Mother Selassie". These nick-names are interesting because they show that, even in a far away Caribbean island, there was concern about an invasion by a European power of this independent African kingdom. On 23 November George McIntosh, who had by then become the acknowledged leader of the workers, was arrested on a charge of treason felony, although he had tried to restore calm during the disturbance. The case against him collapsed at the preliminary examination before the Magistrate.²⁰

Unrest and Intimidation in St Lucia

At the end of 1935 there was a strike of coal loaders in St Lucia. With the recent events in St Kitts and St Vincent very much in mind, the Governor mobilised the local military force and called upon the British Government for reinforcements. A warship was quickly on the scene and for several days and nights marines patrolled the streets of the capital Castries and some rural areas. At night the ship's searchlights illuminated the city. Faced with this massive show of force, the strikers returned to work, to await the report of an official commission of inquiry set up to consider their claims for wage increases. Supported by so much military might, the commissioners felt sufficiently secure to reject all their demands.²¹

The Labour Rebellion in Barbados

Clement Payne, who had been born to Barbadian parents residing in Trinidad, returned to Barbados in March 1937. Shortly after his arrival he began to hold street meetings at Golden Square in Bridgetown, the capital, at which he announced his intention to form a trade union. He had made arrangements to rent a hall on 1 May to celebrate international labour day, but when the proprietor discovered his purpose the arrangement was cancelled. Payne's meetings attracted increasingly large crowds of workers. Others who assisted him with his plan to launch a trade union were FA Chase, Olrick Grant, Mortimer Skeete, Israel Lovell and Darnley Alleyne.

Alarmed at these activities, the Government took action. On entering the island Payne had declared that he had been born in Barbados. This proved to be untrue, although he had believed it to be true. He was

nevertheless prosecuted for knowingly making a false declaration and fined £10, but appealed and was granted bail. On the next day he led a march to Government House, demanding to see the Governor. Payne and several others were arrested and he was refused a renewal of his bail. While in custody awaiting trial he was served with a deportation order.

Payne had been unrepresented at his trial as he had been unable to pay the fee of Grantley Adams, the lawyer he had sought to employ. His followers however took up a collection and raised the money to pay Adams to represent him at the appeal. The appeal, heard on 26 July, was successful, but Payne was not released from custody. Instead, during the night, he was secretly placed aboard a schooner and deported to Trinidad. The Trinidad police were waiting for him and arrested him on a charge of possessing prohibited literature. When it became known that Payne had been deported there was an angry public reaction. On the night of 27 July a large crowd was addressed by his principal supporters. Next day there was widespread rioting in the city:

Shop windows were smashed, cars were pushed into the sea, passers by were attacked, police patrols, caught unarmed and unawares, fled beneath a hail of bottles and stones ... During the next two days the 'trouble' spread to the rural parishes where a few lawless souls stoned cars on the highways while bolder spirits among the hungry poor took advantage of the general fear and confusion to break into shops and raid sweet potato fields ... Shops remained closed, work came to a standstill in town and country alike.²²

At the time of the disturbances a strike at the Central Foundry was in progress. On 28 July the lightermen, whose importance can only be appreciated when it is remembered that at that time a deep water pier had not yet been constructed, came out on strike. They resumed work on 4 August when their demands were met, but sporadic strikes and threats of strikes occurred in several other work places. The Government acted ruthlessly in suppressing the general unrest and disorder. On several occasions the police used firearms.

The final toll was 14 dead, 47 injured and more than 500 arrested. Payne's principal supporters were accused of creating "discontent and disaffection among His Majesty's subjects" and of promoting "ill-will and hostility between different classes" and prosecuted for sedition. Grant and Skeete were sentenced to ten years imprisonment, Lovell and Alleyne to five years. Chase, who was charged for having incited the crowd to

riot, when from the platform he had said: "tonight will be a funny day", was sentenced to imprisonment for nine months.²³

The Labour Rebellion in Trinidad & Tobago

The report of the Wages Board, appointed by the Government of Trinidad & Tobago in 1935, was a great disappointment to the workers. The members of the Board had been required to draw up a Cost of Living Index and, possibly as a result of the report, no legal minimum wage had been established. As one observer commented, the Board "by using questionable indices for assessing the real needs ... , gave the impression that few workers were being paid substandard wages".²⁴ Cipriani had signed the report and this, together with other signs of his growing conservatism, had by 1936 caused most workers to lose confidence in him and the Trinidad Labour Party.²⁵

In September 1936 Uriah Butler, a former oilfield worker turned preacher who was very popular with his fellow immigrants from Grenada, and who had formerly been a supporter of the TWA, severed his relations with Cipriani and launched his own organisation. On 19 June, 1937, after the company had failed to answer his demands for wage increases, Butler called a strike of oil workers at the Forest Reserve premises of Trinidad Leaseholds Limited. A warrant was issued for Butler's arrest but an attempt to arrest him while he was addressing a public meeting was frustrated by the crowd. An unpopular police corporal, part of the party attempting the arrest, was beaten, soaked with paraffin and burned to death. Another policeman was also killed. Butler went into hiding.²⁶

Within two days of this event a strike had engulfed the oilfields. Strikes in other industries and occupations soon followed and before long the entire economy had been paralysed by a general strike. According to an editorial in the *Port Of Spain Gazette*, it was a situation "which assumed a proportion previously unknown in the history of labour agitation" in the colony. A state of emergency was declared and two British warships were rushed to the island, arriving on 22 and 23 June. Marines and sailors were landed and thirteen police officers were brought in from England and two from Ireland. In addition to the constabulary the local military forces – the Trinidad Infantry Volunteers and the Trinidad Light Horse – were mobilised. Numerous arrests and imprisonments followed, but Butler was not arrested until September.

He was subsequently tried and sentenced to two years imprisonment for sedition.²⁷

The attitude adopted by the Governor, Sir Murchison Fletcher, and the Colonial Secretary, Howard Nankivel, contributed to the restoration of calm, which had been restored by the end of July. Both had admitted publicly that wages were too low and that the employers in the oil and sugar industries and the Government had an obligation to ensure that workers were treated fairly and properly remunerated. But the principal share-holders in these mainly foreign owned industries were influential with Government circles in Britain and very soon the Governor was forced to retire and the Colonial Secretary was transferred to another colony.

The Labour Rebellion in Jamaica

In the first quarter of 1937 the growing unrest among peasants, many of whom both farmed their own or rented plots of land and also worked part time on larger properties, and landless agricultural workers, found organisational expression in upper Clarendon in central Jamaica. Robert E Rumble, a small farmer who had returned from Cuba where he had acquired the trade of a coach builder and wheelwright, had formed an organisation which he called the Poor Man's Improvement and Land Settlement Association. By March 1938 he claimed a membership of 800 for his organisation. On 23 April 1938 this organisation addressed a Petition to the Governor:

We are the Sons of Slaves who have been paying rent to the Landlords for fully many decades we want better wages, we have been exploited for years and we are looking to you to help us. We want a Minimum Wage Law. We want freedom in this the hundredth year of our Emancipation. We are still economic slaves, burdened in paying rent to Landlords who are sucking out our vitalities.²⁸

Agitation was conducted by Rumble and his organisation for land for the peasants and proto-peasants and for better wages for agricultural workers. A movement to refuse to pay any more rent to landlords began to spread and, in some areas, land hungry people seized estate lands. This was fuelled by the revival of a widely held belief that Queen Victoria had promised that, 100 years after their emancipation, the slaves who had got nothing at the time of the abolition of slavery would inherit

the land. Tenants and others who seized lands began to erect fences and offered to pay taxes on the lands the ownership of which they claimed to have acquired.²⁹

At the end of December 1937 workers on Serge Island Estate in St Thomas, at the eastern end of the island, refused to start reaping the crop at the rates of pay offered. Police were rushed to the area and, on 4 January, 1938, they reported that some 400 to 500 strikers had forced others to cease work. Sixty-three of the strikers were arrested and, over a period of three days from 13 January, were tried before the Resident Magistrate. Three "ring-leaders" were sentenced to one month's imprisonment with hard labour, 7 were fined £2 and 11 were fined 21/- each with the alternative in default of payment of 30 and 21 days imprisonment respectively. 45 others were admonished and discharged.³⁰ These were relatively lenient sentences.

On 29 March, warned that dissatisfaction among the lowest paid manual workers was assuming island-wide proportions, the Government announced the appointment of a Commission to enquire into rates of wages and conditions of employment of labourers in receipt of not more than thirty shillings per week, its first session to be held on 11 April.³¹

During the first quarter of 1938, large numbers of workers had been converging on Westmoreland at the western end of the island, attracted by the possibility of employment. On 2 May the *Daily Gleaner* published this report:

One thousand labourers, a large proportion of them engaged on the erection of a giant Central Sugar Factory at Frome Estate ... went on strike Friday. They are still out and state that they will only return to work when their demand – one dollar [4/-] per day – is met by the West Indies Sugar Company.³²

Next day the newspaper's reporter on the spot reported:

The old factory on the estate, which up to Friday had been grinding canes, is entirely in the hands of the strikers ... I hear rifle firing, followed by shrieks and cries ... I can see men on the ground. Some are motionless, others are staggering to and fro or crawling away on their hands and knees. The strike has culminated in stark tragedy. A few minutes later I hear that three are dead, eleven wounded and that the police are making many arrests.³³

Four people were killed that day, three by police gunshot and one by a police bayonet. On 4 May the *Gleaner* reported that "the known

cases of persons suffering from wounds has not exceeded twenty-five, the arrests up to yesterday afternoon reached 96".³⁴ But the wounded may have been more numerous as there was a widespread belief that anyone who sought medical treatment would be thereby identifying himself as a participant and inviting arrest. On 13 May the first batch of 27 of the 109 strikers arrested was rushed to trial before the Resident Magistrate at Savanna la Mar, charged with "riotous assembly". The sentences ranged from 30 days to 1 year's imprisonment. At the same time the Governor appointed a Commission to enquire into the disorders.

The events at Frome had an electrifying effect. There were demonstrations of unemployed workers in Kingston, the capital. Waterfront workers in Kingston put forward demands for wage increases and, at the end of the second week of May, came out on strike. On 23 May many other workers in the city struck work and work in the city came to a halt, all the major stores were forced to put up their shutters by marching workers.

On 24 May, the Governor ordered the arrest of William Alexander Bustamante, a popular figure who during recent months had been addressing public protest meetings and writing letters to British Members of Parliament revealing the distressing economic conditions prevailing in the island.³⁵ The arrest of Bustamante and his principal assistant St William Grant,³⁶ and the initial refusal to grant them bail, was a provocation which, despite the appointment of an officially sponsored Conciliation Board on 26 May, unleashed a wave of further strikes and riots.

A week later, realising that the only way to ease the situation was to release Bustamante and Grant, the Government agreed to bail being granted. By that time however the spirit of revolt had spread throughout the island and strikes and demonstrations were occurring in every parish. This situation continued for many weeks, despite the use of the battalion of British troops stationed on the island to supplement the police. Workers were killed and injured and many arrests took place.³⁷

By the end of June calm had been restored. A number of factors had contributed to this. Perhaps the most important had been the launching by Bustamante of a trade union and assurances from him and the much respected barrister NW Manley³⁸ that the workers would receive proper representation. The announcement on 14 June that a Royal Commission would be arriving shortly to investigate conditions had undoubtedly created expectations that improvements would be forthcoming. On 28 June Acting Governor Woolley had announced in the Legislative Council



*The deputation for Bustamante's release
to Headquarters House, May 1938.*

that two loans would be raised to finance land settlements and other infrastructural developments.³⁹

The Labour Rebellion Renewed in Guyana

The number of labour disputes in Guyana, which had declined to two in 1936 and four in 1937, rose sharply in 1938. Between January and September in 1938 there were over thirty disputes involving over 12,000 workers.⁴⁰ But none of these strikes was called by the Man Power Citizens Association, the trade union which had been formed in 1936 and was organising field workers in the sugar industry for the first time, but had not yet been recognised by the Sugar Producers Association.

While the members of the West India Royal Commission (see below) were in Guyana taking evidence in February 1939, a major strike broke

out at Plantation Leonora. The strike had started among the field workers but, on 16 February, between 70 and 100 strikers entered the factory and persuaded the factory workers to leave. This operation had been peaceful, but when armed police arrived shortly afterwards and arrested five of the strikers, they were pelted with stones and a large crowd assembled at the entrance to the factory. Other police guarding the manager's house were also stoned.

The police drove the strikers back with fixed bayonets and a police car was damaged and its occupants injured. The police fired on the crowd, killing four and four others were admitted to hospital with bullet wounds. In all twenty-three were injured. On 2 March 1939, in a move to diffuse the rising discontent, the Sugar Producers Association agreed to recognise the MPCA as the bargaining agent of the workers. The Government appointed a Commission of Enquiry into the events that had occurred at Leonora.⁴¹

Islands Without Rebellions in the 1930s

Although the labour rebellions of the 1930s had swept like a wave across the British colonies of the Caribbean region, there were some colonies in which rebellions did not occur. Because of their very small size and the absence of concentrations of workers either in urban centres or on plantations, no labour rebellions occurred in the Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos Islands, the Cayman Islands or the British Virgin Islands. There

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The Daily Gleaner.
 ESTABLISHED 1884

ESTABLISHED 1884

Twenty-four Pages Vol. CIX, No. 119 KINGSTON, JAMAICA, WEDNESDAY, MAY 25, 1938 Price: PENNY HALF-PENNY TWENTY-FOUR PAGES

Two Killed, One Seriously Wounded As Police Fire To Drive Back Mob: Labour Leader Bustamante Arrested And Held Without Bail.

Another Hectic Night & Day In City Mr. Manley Pledges Himself To Advocate Labour's Cause

Military And Armed Police Combine To Patrol Metropolis

Bail Is Refused For Bustamante And Grant

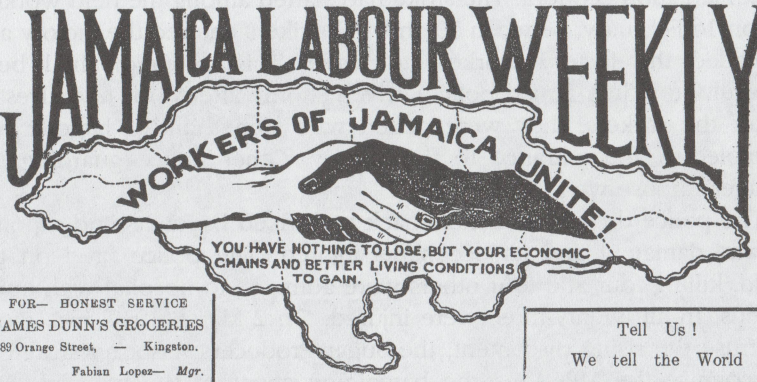
Labour Leaders Kept In Jail at the request of the Police. The Police have refused to grant bail to Mr. Bustamante and Mr. Grant. They are being held in the Police Court to-day.

Leadership & Response Assistance Needed To present Grievance - Of Workers OFFERS SERVICE

RECALLING THE N...
 Mr. Manley, K.C., has...
 of the labourers with a...

Headline from The Daily Gleaner, Wednesday 25 May 1938.

JAMAICA LABOUR WEEKLY



FOR— HONEST SERVICE
JAMES DUNN'S GROCERIES
 89 Orange Street, — Kingston.
 Fabian Lopez— Mgr.

Tell Us!
 We tell the World

Vol. 1. No. 1.
Kingston, Jamaica, Saturday, 14th May, 1938.
1D.

THE CALL TO UNITY!

Fellow Workers

The bugle call of loyalty to ourselves and working class unity is sounding. Awake! The facts are simple and need no great prophet to interpret them. Our country is rich; capable of providing food, clothes and shelter on a decent standard, for her million and a quarter population. There is no just reason why some of us should not have anywhere to lay our heads. There is no just reason why some of us should live on the brink of starvation and nakedness.

Something is wrong somewhere. Why is it that the majority of the population—Artisans, labourers, peasants and small businessmen must always be holding grievance meetings, and signing petitions? Why is it that in spite of these grievance meetings, and petitions to government, our condition remains the same; surely is even getting worse day by day? Why is it that we are starving in spite of the two million pounds government Loan? Our task is to find the reason why.

Speaking of the vast majority, we are the descendants of slaves, a people who have come down the stream of time with great suffering. With the granting of freedom, one hundred years ago, our forefathers settled down to carve themselves a place in the country, alongside of their masters. The present development of the country is ample evidence of black sweat poured out upon the land.

Many of us have gone to the malarial swamps of Panama, to the snake infested fields of Costa Rica and Cuba. Many of us have made good and brought back money here. Many of us without even travelling have made good, bought lands and reared decent families. But Alas! What has happened? In spite of all our toil and carefulness our properties are hopelessly mortgaged to Building Societies and moneylenders.

ers. Our houses are falling into disrepair and we are more indebted now than we were at the start. Our daughters have become prostitutes, and our sons roam the streets of the city in a vain search for work. The monster "Unemployment" is with us. We are in the clutches of a new type slavery.

Strange thing of it all is, that many of our fellow-countrymen who happen to be in a better position than us believe that God made them superiors and us, inferiors. Some of them believe that we should get a pittance, enough to prevent us from dying outright of starvation and exposure. Others have no sympathy at all; we may die for the little that they care. A small section of them genuinely sympathize with our case. Secret sympathy is all right, but the situation is desperate. It is time that our friends come out into the open.

Repeated newspaper announcements about work being started to relieve unemployment, leave us disappointed. Rates of wages are going down and commodity prices are rising. When we do get the little work, it is not enough to satisfy our current demands, to say nothing of paying the debts owed for rent and groceries.

Maybe, government and the rich people who have the power and knowledge to make things better for us, will finally make a move and do it. We are waiting and watching. In the meantime, while we wait and watch, our slogan shall be— "EVERY WORKINGMAN A COMRADE."

Support the

"Labour Weekly"

were also three islands – Dominica, Grenada and Antigua – where, in the 1930s, although there were plantations and distressing poverty existed, no labour rebellions occurred. How is this to be explained?

A relevant factor in Dominica and Grenada may have been that in those islands independent peasant farmers comprised a larger percentage of the working population than in the other islands, but this was not the case in Antigua. In Grenada a labour rebellion did subsequently occur but not until 1950-51, after the return to the island of Eric Gairy and Gascoigne Blaize who had been working in the oil refinery in the Dutch colony of Aruba and had been members of the Aruba Labour Union. What needs to be explained in relation to Grenada therefore is not the absence of a rebellion but the time-lag before it occurred.

A Grenadian historian, recording the fact that no labour rebellion had occurred at the time, offered this explanation:

The Grenadian estate owners, the employers of agricultural labour, who were spared these holocausts took heed of the saying "when your neighbours' house is on fire, wet yours". It was solely for this reason that there were voluntary agreements and co-operation with the authorities whenever they recommended a wage increase.⁴²

But there is no evidence that any such recommendations were made at this time. A trade union had been formed in Grenada after this had become legally possible there in 1933, but had not succeeded in attracting many members. A possible, if speculative, factor contributing to the time-lag in the outbreak of the rebellion may have been that the popular masses had greater faith in the efficacy of political representations in Grenada than elsewhere. Such an illusion may have been a by-product of the immense popularity and reputation of T Albert Marryshow, Member of the Legislative Council, whose orientation was entirely political.

The case of Antigua was entirely different to that of Grenada and Dominica. Like the neighbouring island of St Kitts, Antigua in the 1930s was almost entirely devoted to the production of sugar. But the clash between the plantation owners and the workers did not develop there until 1951, by which time the great majority of the workers were well organised and represented by the Antigua Trades and Labour Union, an affiliate of the Caribbean Labour Congress. The class conflict there took the form of a lock-out by the employers and a general strike called by the Union which had reduced all economic activity to a stand-still.

THEY HAVE

**Raised the Pay to 2s. per day,
Lowered the Working hours from
8 to 6,
Increased the number of days to five,
Given us a Free Lunch.**

WHY?

***Dont be fooled by anyone!*
We WON because we stuck togeth-
er and refused to take their
1s. 6d.**

**ONLY 149 TRAITORS LET US DOWN
COMRADES WE HAVE WON A
GREAT VICTORY!**

**Three Cheers for the Trade Union
Council who Fought our cause They
did not tell us to take 1s. 6d.**

Comrades! This is the Way to Win!

*Leaflet issued by Jamaica TUC in 1939 announcing increase obtained
for daily paid relief workers.*

The deadlock was resolved when the colonial Government set up a Commission of Enquiry at which both sides were represented by lawyers. The Union's representative was Richard Hart, Secretary of the Caribbean Labour Congress, and Quintin O'Connor, a leading trade union official from Trinidad, gave evidence on trade union practice and labour relations on behalf of the Union. Although a tense situation developed when the Governor had troops flown in from Jamaica and the Union withdrew from the Enquiry, calm was restored two weeks later when the troops were withdrawn. The proceedings were orderly and the situation could not be described, as in the other colonies, as a labour rebellion.

The West India Royal Commission

The decision of the British Government to appoint the West India Royal Commission was a response to the cumulative effect of the labour rebellions in the region. The idea, which may have originated in the Colonial Office, was proposed soon after it became known in London that the wave of social explosions had reached Jamaica. It was discussed at a Cabinet meeting on 25 May, after which the Secretary of State for the Colonies gave a somewhat cynical explanation of the purpose it would serve:

An early announcement that a Royal Commission was to visit the Islands would have a good psychological effect in these Colonies. It would tend to reassure their people that we here *are* keenly interested in their affairs, and anxious to do what we can to help, and it would therefore tend to calm excited feelings there.⁴³

The proposal having been cleared with the Prime Minister and by him with the King, West Indian Governors were informed of it on 13 June and it was announced next day in the House of Commons.⁴⁴ The Commissioners took written and oral evidence in London and in the colonies after their arrival there in November 1938 and made their report on 21 December 1939. By that time however Britain was at war with Germany and the conditions of poverty in the colonies which the report disclosed were so appalling that, to avoid the possibility of its being used in enemy propaganda, its publication was suppressed. At the time, only the recommendations of the Commissioners were published.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The labour rebellions of the 1930s increased the self confidence of the workers in these colonies and convinced them of the influence they could exert by united action. The principal immediate benefit that the workers derived from the rebellions was that they forced upon the Royal Commission, and through its recommendations the British Government, a realisation of the need to bring trade union legislation in all the colonies into line with legislation in Britain.

Trade Unions were made lawful in those colonies where they had previously been unlawful. In all the colonies legislation was amended or introduced making peaceful picketing of employers' premises lawful and giving trade unionists immunity from actions for breach of contract as a result of strikes. The organisation of trade unions followed in all the colonies and the foundations were laid for the modern trade union movements, which continue to contribute to the struggle for an improved standard of living.

What occurred in the 1930s was a series of spontaneous uncoordinated uprisings. There had been no advance planning. Neither the leaders who emerged nor the participants had had any premeditated conscious objectives. Nor, during the course of the rebellions, did the workers or their leaders develop any revolutionary demands, such as the expropriation of property, the seizure of political power by the working class or the achievement of political independence. But this does not in any way detract from the historical significance of what had taken place.

Lest We Forget!

From behind Prison Bars
comes this message

From Comrade
Buchanan

"I am a member of the working class and I shall not rest content until my class has triumphed. What I have suffered for labour has been suffered in doing what I considered it my duty to do

For another four months they will prevent me from serving the cause I love so well. In the meantime it is the duty of every comrade who is not constrained in prison, to sacrifice himself for his class, for his country, for Humanity. Workers of Jamaica—carry on the struggle."

Leaflet issued by Jamaica Labour Weekly in December 1938 with message from its imprisoned editor.

Endnotes

1. Public Record Office: CO 318/433/7.
2. *West Indies & Caribbean Year Book 1969*, London, Thomas Skinner & Co., 1969.
3. *Eighth Census of Jamaica and its Dependencies 1943*, Kingston, Central Bureau of Statistics, 1945; R Hart, *The Origin and Development of the People of Jamaica*, Kingston, TUC Education Dept., 1952.
4. R Hart, *Origin and Development of the Working Class in the English-Speaking Caribbean Area 1897 to 1937*, London, Community Educ. Trust, 1975.
5. O Nigel Bolland, *On the March: Labour Rebellions in the British Caribbean 1934-39*, Kingston, Ian Randle, 1995, p.45, citing Public Record Office: CO 123/346/35524 – P E Mathews, *Report to the Governor*, 27 November, 1934.
6. *ibid.*, p.48.
7. PRO: CO 123/353 File 66571 – Governor A. C. Burns to Secretary of State, 31 March 1935.
8. Bolland, *op. cit.*, p.50 citing PRO: CO 123/353 File 66571 – S.A. McKinstry to Burns, 22 July 1935.
9. *ibid.*, p.51 citing PRO: CO 123/253 File 66568 – Burns to Secretary of State, 13 June 1935.
10. *ibid.*, p.84.
11. S Basdeo, *Labour Organisation and Labour Reform in Trinidad 1919-1939*, St. Augustine, Trinidad, Univ. of the W. I., n.d., pp.111-113, citing *Report of Labour Disturbances Commission 1934*.
12. Govt. of Trinidad & Tobago Legislative Council Paper Nos. 104/109 of 1934.
13. Bolland, *op. cit.*, pp.174-180 citing PRO: CO 111/726 File 60036 – Report of J. Nicole, District Commissioner, 3 October 1934, *Report of Commission of Inquiry on the 1935 Disturbances*, 24 August, 1936, Actg. Governor C Douglas Jones, 24 January 1935 and Governor G Northcote to Secretary of State, 17 October 1935.
14. Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaica Labour Rebellion of 1938 and its Aftermath*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1978, p.240 citing *Plain Talk*, 18 May 1935.
15. Post, *op. cit.*, p.240 citing PRO: 137/806 File 68557 Police Inspector i/c Trelawney to Inspector General, 22 May 1935.
16. Post, *op. cit.*, p.262, note 21, citing *Plain Talk*, 28 January, 1938.
17. R Hart, *Rise and Organise: The Birth of the Workers and National Movements in Jamaica (1936 - 1939)*.
18. Jos N France, "Working Class Struggles of Half a Century", unpublished collection of articles in *The Union Messenger*, pp.92-100 (copy in R. Hart's possession).
19. R Gonsalves, *The Role of Labour in the Political Process of St Vincent (1935-1970)*, Univ. of the W I, MSc. Thesis (unpublished) citing interviews with eyewitnesses.
20. The case received much attention. The *Port of Spain Gazette* in Trinidad published a verbatim report of the Preliminary Examination (undated).
21. W Arthur Lewis, *Labour in the West Indies*, Fabian Society, London, 1939.
22. Francis Mark, *The History of the Barbados Workers Union*, Barbados Workers Union, Bridgetown, n.d., pp.5-6.
23. *ibid.*, p.7.
24. Selwyn Ryan, *Race & Nationalism in Trinidad & Tobago*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1972, pp.40-41.
25. Captain Arthur Cipriani, a white Trinidadian race horse owner, had been an officer with the West Indian contingent during the First World War. Popular because of his protests against the racial discrimination suffered by black troops, he had become President of the Trinidadian Workingmens Association.
26. Bolland, *op. cit.*, p.91; Basdeo, *op. cit.*, p.150.
27. Basdeo, *op. cit.*, p.150, quoting *Port of Spain Gazette*, 22 June, 1937, and p.159.
28. *Plain Talk*, 30 April 1938.
29. R. Hart, *Rise and Organise ...*, pp. 95-97 citing *Jamaica Standard*, 25 May 1938 and PRO: CO 137/827 File 68868 – minute by JH Emmens, 23 June 1938. Rumble was arrested and, on 27 December 1938, was sentenced to 6 months imprisonment at hard labour.
30. *Daily Gleaner*, 13-15 January 1938.
31. *Report of the Commission ... to Enquire into the Disturbances ... in Jamaica between 23rd May and 8th June, 1938*, Govt. Printing Office, Kingston, 1938, Appendix 1.
32. *Daily Gleaner*, 2 May, 1938. The West Indies Sugar Company was a wholly-owned subsidiary of the British sugar refiners Tate & Lyle, which had gone into sugar production in 1937, acquiring plantations in Jamaica and Trinidad.
33. *Daily Gleaner*, 3 May, 1938.
34. *Daily Gleaner*, 4 May, 1938.
35. Bustamante had returned to Jamaica in 1934, having resided in Cuba (where he had changed his surname from Clarke to Bustamante), and then in the USA. He had set up in business as a money lender.
36. Grant had been a member of Marcus Garvey's UNIA organisation in New York. A well-known street orator in Kingston, he had in 1938 invited Bustamante to speak on his platform.
37. Detailed accounts of the events in Jamaica in 1938 are contained in R Hart, *Rise and Organise*, and *Towards Decolonisation*, Univ. of the W I Press, Kingston, 1999.
38. Later in 1938 NW Manley, KC, took the initiative in launching the People's National Party.
39. Post, *op. cit.* p.311.
40. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 26
41. Bolland, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-187 citing PRO: CO 111/762 File 60270 – Report of Leonora Enquiry Commission, 23 March 1939.
42. George Brizan, *Grenada: Island of Conflict*, Zed Books, London, 1984, p.236.
43. R Hart, *Rise and Organise...*, p. 98 quoting PRO: CO 137/827 File 68868/2 - Cabinet Papers.
44. Post, *op. cit.*, p.331.
45. *West India Royal Commission 1938-39: Statement of Action Taken on the Recommendations*, Cmd. 6656. HMSO, London. The full report was not published until 1945.

CARIBBEAN LABOUR SOLIDARITY

CLS was founded in 1974 by a group of activists from the Caribbean community and the wider labour movement in response to an appeal from independent trades unionists in Jamaica, for support in their struggle against anti-union legislation. After this campaign, it was decided that there was a need for a permanent anti-imperialist organisation which would promote the support of the mounting democratic movement which was by then sweeping the Caribbean.

Our roots are in the Caribbean and the wider working class community. We work to unite all those who struggle against imperialism and for the building of strong international links between working people here and in the Caribbean in their fight for human rights and justice. We have links with progressive organisations throughout the Caribbean region with whom we exchange information and offer mutual support and solidarity.

We have, we believe, a very important educational role in disseminating information in this area that is not usually available through the normal sources. We do this through our monthly public meetings, our quarterly bulletin *Cutlass*, our website and through press releases, leaflets and periodical articles and at conferences and demonstrations. We associate ourselves fully with all the progressive and working peoples' movements in the Caribbean, and rejoice in the victories won by the Cuban revolution.

CLS also sets itself the aim of mobilising opinion in defence of the pan-African bonds that exist between all black peoples in Africa, Europe and the Americas in their struggles against racism and imperialism. Recognising Britain's bitter racist legacy, Caribbean Labour Solidarity seeks united action with all Caribbean and working class solidarity organisations which share our commitment to anti-imperialist and anti-racist struggle.

CLS meetings

We invite speakers with first hand knowledge to each CLS meeting to lead discussion on current situations that face the Caribbean Community, in Britain and in the Caribbean region, as well as wider international issues. We discuss topics and generate involvement in campaigning activities in a way you will not find in the wider media. Topics and issues discussed at recent meetings include: The Grenada 17; The Recolonisation of the Caribbean; Preparations for General Elections in Guyana and Jamaica; The problems faced by the Caribbean Banana industry; The US invasion of Grenada – fifteen years on; Asylum and Immigration Bill; Role of Black Lawyers in USA; Affordable Drugs – South Africa v Multinational Pharmaceutical Companies

Join Caribbean Labour Solidarity!

Membership fees: Individual – £12.00; Concessions – £5.00;
Organisations – £15.00; National/International Organisations – £25.00
Write to: CLS, 138 Southgate Road, Islington, London N1 3HX

THE SOCIALIST HISTORY SOCIETY

The Socialist History Society was founded 10 years ago and includes among its members many of this country's leading Socialist and labour historians. We have a growing membership of both academics and others who might consider themselves amateur historians. The SHS holds regular events, public meetings and one-off conferences, and contributes to current historical debates and controversies. The society produces a range of publications, including the journal *Socialist History*. We can sometimes assist with individual student research.

The SHS is the successor to the Communist Party History Group, established in 1946. The society is now independent of all political parties and groups. We are engaged in and seek to encourage historical studies from a Marxist and broadly-defined left perspective. We are concerned with every aspect of human history from early social formations to the present day and aim for a global reach.

We are particularly interested in the struggles of labour, women, progressive and peace movements throughout the world, as well as the movements and achievements of colonial peoples, black people, and other oppressed communities in seeking justice, human dignity and liberation.

Each year we produce two issues of our journal *Socialist History*, two historical pamphlets in our Occasional Papers series, and a members' newsletter.

We hold a lecture and debate in London every two months. In addition, we organise occasional conferences, book-launch meetings, and joint events with other sympathetic groups. We aim to hold more events outside London.

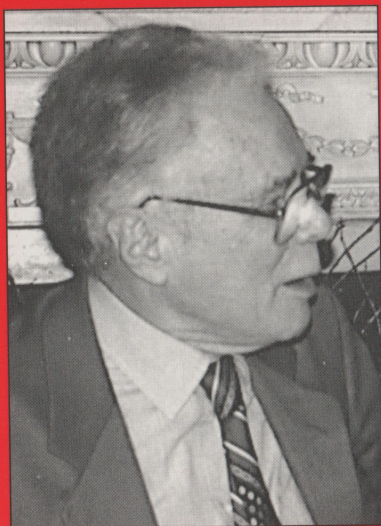
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Full UK	£18.00
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Overseas concessionary	£17.00

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION AND ITS AUTHOR

This is a slightly revised version of a paper presented by Richard Hart at a meeting of the Socialist History Society in March, 2002. It gives an account of the series of workers' uprisings in the British Caribbean region colonies in the 1930s. These labour rebellions laid the foundations for the modern trade union movements in these countries, which subsequently became politically independent.

The author was involved in trade union activities in these territories for many years. A member of the Labour Committee formed in Jamaica in 1938 by Norman Manley to assist William Alexander Bustamante in the formation of a trade union, he had the responsibility of drafting a model trade union constitution. He was in 1939 the Secretary of the Trade Union Advisory Council, which subsequently became the Trade Union Council. President of the Jamaica Government Railway Employees Union from 1942 until its merger with other unions in 1948, he was a Vice President of the Trade Union Congress of Jamaica from 1949 to 1953. On the wider regional plain he was Assistant Secretary of the Caribbean Labour Congress on its formation in 1945 and its Secretary from 1946 until its demise in 1953.