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POLITICAL REPRESSION IN GUYANA:
THE WORKING PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE

THE CASES OF

Walter Rodney
Omawale
Rupert Roopnarine
Maurice Odle

AND THE KILLING OF

Father Bernard Darke, Catholic
Priest and Journalist

On Wednesday, July 11 at daybreak, several burnings occurred in Georgetown, Guyana, involving the death of one individual, a watchman. Burned were the governing PNC Party Headquarters (which also housed the national election records), the Ministry of National Mobilization, and the headquarters of the Guyana Sugar Company. These burnings took place approximately one week after the Working People's Alliance announced it would enter candidates in the forthcoming general election.

In the wake of these fires several scholars of international reputation were arrested and detained by the police: Maurice Odle, Director, Institute for Development Studies, University of Guyana; Omawale, former lecturer at the University of Guyana; Walter Rodney, internationally renowned Africanist, scholar, author and lecturer, who incidentally has been illegally denied a teaching position at the University of Guyana, previously offered to him by the University; and Rupert Roopnarine, in whose home the police allege to have found a cache of weapons.

Following a court hearing July 14, during which Rodney, Omawale, and Roopnarine were charged formally with arson, a demonstration by the Working People's Alliance was met with violence from a counter-demonstration by a pro-PNC group, the House of Israel Cult. In the ensuing melee, soldiers of the Guyanese Defense Force used bayonets against the peaceful WPA demonstrators. Father Bernard Darke, a Jesuit priest, author of several articles critical of the government which appeared in the newspaper *Catholic Standard* was shot and later died July 16. Eleven others were injured, five seriously, including a journalist for the *Catholic Standard* whose hand was cut off.

Walter Rodney, who was subsequently released on \$5,000 bail, and the other academics detained by the police previously published *Day Clean*, the organ of the WPA which has been silenced through government seizure of typewriters and printing equipment. Though not formerly charged, Odle is being

required to report to the police on a daily basis. The police allege that his car was seen in the vicinity of the PNC headquarters around the time of the fire.

The violence surrounding the demonstration on Saturday appears to have been the work of the House of Israel, one of several religious cults that have been given official sponsorship by the Burnham government and which have been frequently used as a weapon for committing armed violence against the political opposition in Guyana.

The leader of the House of Israel is an American, David Hill (Rabbi E.E. Washington) who first sought refuge in Algeria following a felony conviction in the United States. Following his expulsion from Algeria, he and several members of his group settled in Guyana. The House of Israel is another of the religious cults, like James Jones's People's Temple, which have found haven in Guyana under Burnham because of their financial contributions to the governing party and their willingness to be involved in the PNC's dirty work.

The political context in which the recent events have unfolded may be understood in part with reference to ethnic issues which have constituted a central cleavage in the Guyanese body politic. East Indians in Guyana are in a numerical majority and have their own party, the PPP (the People's Progressive Party). Forbes Burnham's ruling party, the PNC (the People's National Congress), is, in reality, a minority party representing the Afro-Guyanese segment of the population. It is important to recall, that it was indeed an electoral manipulation which originally brought Burnham to power and which deepened the ethnic cleavage in Guyana. The strategy of proportional representation was introduced by the British and supported by the *United States CIA*, and was the means by which Burnham was able to defeat Cheddi Jagan in the 1964 election. This electoral device is the central fact in the hardening of ethnic lines of voting in Guyana. Proportional representation in itself could be fully justified as a perfectly legal and legitimate means of bringing about greater parity between the number of votes cast and that of seats won, as opposed to the plurality voting system which consistently assured disproportionately high majorities to the PPP. It remains however, that in practice, its symbolic significance as electoral manipulation in favor of Burnham and the PNC proved to be a sign of things to come, especially as, by 1964, voting patterns had pretty much hardened along ethnic lines, and as the East Indian population became a majority. As a result, Burnham's illegitimate political ascent with the full backing of the American *CIA* in the early years, has required him to resort to more and more electoral manipulations to retain power. He has been charged with stuffing ballot boxes and also with permitting

non-Guyanese to vote in national elections. He has studiously cultivated an ostensible overseas Guyanese vote of essentially Afro-Guyanese. These electoral manipulations have been documented by the British and other international observers who have found that many of the overseas voters are infants and under-age children. ITV in Britain presented a documentary which investigated electoral fraud in Guyana and produced substantial evidence to support these charges. For example, in 1968 the *Opinion Research Center* in England conducted a survey that showed that, out of a preliminary overseas voter registration list of 43,000, probably only about 10,000 people were eligible voters. The 1968 elections also saw the introduction and manipulation of proxy voting to the benefit of the PNC.

At the core of the current political upheavals in Guyana is the fact that Forbes Burnham came to power on the basis of *CIA* foreign intervention and has had to sustain his power illegitimately throughout his tenure in office. Key among the devices he had employed has been limiting means of expression of the opposition party and dissidents more generally. The *Mirror*, organ of the PPP, has been restricted through government control of newsprint. Cheddi Jagan, who was the victim of the *CIA* manipulations which brought Burnham to power, has had his political activities hampered in a number of ways and has been the object of a good deal of harrassment. The headquarters of the PPP has been searched numerous times and Jagan's movements are carefully monitored.

The Working People's Alliance (WPA) has emerged in reaction to the hardening of ethnic lines, and is a truly non-racial political movement which offers the only currently available non-racist and progressive alternative to the Guyanese people. All of the individuals involved in the detention have been closely associated with the establishment and organization of the WPA. In this same connection, it should be noted that Eusi Kwayana, one of the leaders of WPA, was attacked during a WPA rally in Buxton, just prior to the burnings. The House of Israel also seems implicated in the disturbances at the Buxton rally and the attack on Kwayana. It is strongly felt that there is a link between WPA and its announced political objectives in the forthcoming national election, the Kwayana anti-government rally, and the sudden burnings of the afore-mentioned buildings. It is hardly plausible to suppose that WPA, in the midst of launching a peaceful electoral campaign against the current regime, would have resorted to any terrorist action, which is what the Guyana government is alleging.

There is in Guyana at this time a wholesale onslaught against the leadership of WPA. Kwayana is the leading Afro-

Guyanese nationalist in the country, but despite his background as a black power leader, he has deserted Burnham due to the clear bankruptcy of the Burnham leadership. ASCRIA (Association for Cultural Relations with Independent Africa) and an Indian group led by Moses Bhagwan make up the nucleus of the WPA. The WPA can be seen as a significant breakaway from past racial politics in Guyana and the most serious impetus for a Guyanese nation grounded on socialist transformation.

The growing desperation of the Burnham government is apparent in these latest acts of political repression. He unmasks himself again, as he did in the events of 1972, when Joshua Ramsamy, University biology lecturer and member of a group which published a newsletter called *RATOON*, containing critical articles on politics and the economy, was shot. Although there were witnesses to this shooting who recorded the license plate of the car from which the shots were fired, the culprits were never apprehended. Around this same time, there was an attempt to kidnap Dr. Clive Thomas, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, who was a leading member of the *RATOON* group. Dr. Thomas is an internationally renowned development economist and socialist theorist and is also currently a leading member of the WPA. In 1974, Walter Rodney, then a lecturer in history at the University of Dar es Salaam, was offered a Professorship in history at the University of Guyana. Subsequently, Hamilton Greene, Minister of Mobilization in the Guyanese government, a man closely tied to Prime Minister Forbes Burnham, personally pressured the Vice-Chancellor of the University into convening a new meeting of the trustees to reconsider the matter. Such a meeting was illegal. It took place anyway, and Greene was able to coerce the trustees into rescinding the earlier decision. Consequently, Walter Rodney, an internationally known historian who has lectured in Africa, in the West Indies, and many American Universities, has been barred from doing any teaching in his own country.

Three more persons were arrested in Guyana on Tuesday, July 17, 1979. They are: Desmond Ali, St. John, and Ali Majhid. No charges have been laid against them. They are members of the "Organization of Working People" based in Linden (the main bauxite area of Guyana) and have close working relations with the WPA. The Burnham government is obviously trying to round up people connected with the WPA. There is presently a great fear that, in its desperate need to provide some cover for its repressive onslaught against the WPA, the government will forcibly coerce detainees to make incriminating confessions. Right now there is also great fear for the safety of four individuals, Walter Rodney, Rupert Roopnarine, Omawale, and Kwame Apata. Apata is not a member of WPA but is a member of ASCRIA, a fraternal organization of the WPA. Earlier this week sixteen army officers tendered their resignation to the

Government in protest against the appointment of Norman McLean, an ex-police officer, as Major-General of the Army. Their resignations were not accepted.

We deplore the acts of political repression manifest in recent events in Guyana and the fascist tactics employed by the PNC and Burnham to silence political opposition. Letters of concern should be sent to the Guyanese Ambassador to the United States, Lawrence E. Mann, 2490 Tracy Place, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008; Prime Minister of Guyana (Forbes L. Burnham); the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights; and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

Send contributions to:

"Guyana Alliance Legal Defence Fund"
c/o Joseph Woolcock
School of Education
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305

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