

## Organized Labour and the Indian Sugar Workers in British Guiana

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### *Abstract*

*This paper examines the attempts that were made to unionize the Indian Guyanese sugar workers in the first half of the twentieth century. The paper discusses the pioneering work in union formation done by Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow, who was the first trade unionist to represent the Indian sugar workers in British Guiana. The paper traces the activities on the sugar industry and discusses the rise and fall of unionists and unions.*

### Introduction

In this paper I will provide an overview of organized labour and the Indian sugar workers. The abolition of slavery, in 1834, and the emancipation of the African Guianese slaves in 1838 created a shortage of labour on the sugar estates. The planters had attempted to fill the vacuum by enticing workers from Europe, North America, the West Indies, China and Africa to migrate to Guiana (Stoll, 2014: 27-29). The movement of these labourers had brought limited success. The planters were extremely successful, however, with the Indian immigration scheme.

During May 1838, two vessels arrived in British Guiana with labourers from India to work on the sugar plantations. The first ship, the *Hesperus*, docked on the evening of 5 May, with a cargo of 406 humans. The *Whitby* also arrived in May<sup>1</sup>. The introduction of the first batch of Indian sugar workers was a private enterprise. They comprised mainly hill coolies. The planter who had initially invested in this business venture was Joseph Gladstone.

The newly arrived labourers, began to work on the Berbice estates of Waterloo, and Highbury, Anna Regina in the Essequibo, and Vreed-en-Hoop, which was on the west bank of Demerara. The males entered into five year contracts of indenture. Narine states:

During the years 1838 to 1917 our ancestral footprints have been imprinted in many countries. The records show that Indians went to British Guiana in 1838 and they were in other countries as follows: Trinidad (1845), Martinique (1853), French Guiana (1854), Guadeloupe (1854), Grenada (1857), Belize (1859), St. Lucia (1859), St. Vincent (1861), St. Croix (1863), and Suriname (1873). The statistics show that British Guiana had the biggest number of emigrants. During the period (1838 to 1917) British Guiana received 238, 909 Indians. The other countries received as follows: Trinidad 143,939; Jamaica 37,027; St. Vincent 2,472; Grenada 3,200; Belize 3,000; St. Lucia 4,354; Suriname 34, 304; St. Croix 3221; Martinique 25,509; Guadeloupe 42,326; and French Guiana 8,500 (2018: 48).

There were complaints that the Indian workers were abused and over-

<sup>1</sup> Of the 170 souls embarked on the *Hesperus*, consisting of 155 men, 5 women and 10 children, 156 landed, 12 having died on the voyage of 90 days, and 2 accidentally drowned. Of the 267 souls who boarded the *Whitby*, 263 landed, after a period of 114 days of sailing, 4 having died on the voyage (Ruhoman, 1988: 27).

worked. The reports of the Anti-slavery society contributed to a suspension of the importation of Indian labour in 1839:

Within six months of their arrival, reports reached Britain that the Indians were adapting to their new living situation, but by January 1839 agents of the Anti-Slavery Society accused some planters in Demerara of ill-treatment, including whipping, and expressed concerns over the high death rate of the Indians. The Society, which kept a close watch on the plantations to ensure that slavery in another form was not re-introduced, claimed that because of bad treatment which included flogging and imprisonment, some Indians had run away from the plantations. It also reported that each indenture was paid an equivalent of less than a third of what they should be getting.

Shortly after, a three-man team led by the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, John Scoble, visited Guyana to investigate the conditions under which the Indians worked and lived. After observing the conditions first hand they reported their concerns to the Governor, Sir Henry Light. In response to these charges, the Governor appointed a commission of inquiry and several African plantation labourers, who bravely gave evidence, supported the Society's accusations against the offending planters. The commission found that the Indians were indeed being ill-treated and the Governor ordered the prosecution of those who had brutalised them.

When news of the ill-treatment of the Indians reached India, the British authorities there immediately placed a ban on emigration to Guyana. The sugar planters in Guyana were very upset over this development since they were hoping that, if they continued to obtain a sizable labour force, they would be able to make fairly large profits (<http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/chapter50.html>).

Madras arrived by the ship *Nestor*. Between 1845 and 1848, twenty four ships came from Madras and twenty-one from Calcutta, with 6,417 and 5,424 persons, respectively (Viswanathan, 1990: 3-4). Indian immigration was suspended in 1848, but finally resumed in 1851. This movement of farm labour from India to British Guiana, was temporarily suspended first on 12 March 1917, and confirmed on 27 March.

Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian nationalists had led the crusade against indentureship. On 17 April 1917, the last ship of Indian indentured servants arrived in British Guiana. According to Mahase, Gandhi had threatened to go on hunger strike if the remaining contracts, were not all cancelled. The British Parliament made all contracts void, on 1 January 1920 (GIHR News, 2017:4).

During the period under discussion, Indian sugar workers demanded social justice. They were subjected to numerous abuses. The estate officials abused the provisions of the labour laws. By the late 1860s, indentureship had become very costly. Low wages and high unemployment created a volatile environment. Hence, officials employed various measures to extend the five year contract of the Indian workers. The worker was paid a weekly wage if he did not contravene any of the labour laws. As an institution, the plantation had created so many laws that made it extremely difficult to collect a decent wage. According to Kandhi, 'petitions, protests, strikes and riots were the order of the day' (1989: 3). There were over 600 strikes which resulted in assaults on managers, overseers and drivers and the deaths of 50 labourers within the first hundred years of plantation labour.

The cruel nature of many of the managers and the loose interpretation of the labour laws, contributed to the rise in conflicts and disputes on the estates. Ordinance 9 of 1868 gave Planters the power to stop all wages for badly done or incomplete work. The first major strike occurred on 5 August 1869. There was a clash between management and the labourers at the Leonora plantation, on the West coast of Demerara.<sup>2</sup> The crowd of about three hundred was led by Balbunder, a Sepoy<sup>3</sup>. He as well as Gopaul, Seerage, Outree, Bhugwansing, Lutchman, Teeluckdhary, Deby, Eboo, Khodobaccus, Baldea, Mongal, and Maylah, were tried for assault. The women who participated in the riots were not arrested. The court acquitted Khodobaccus because of lack of evidence, and sentenced Lutchman, Baldea and Seerage to five years penal servitude each. Gopaul and Outree were jailed for twelve months with hard labour.

There were labour disputes during 1869 at plantations Farm, Mahaico, Chateau Margot, Success, La Jalousie, Goldstone Hall, Hague, Uitvlugt,

<sup>2</sup> It seemed to stem from the arrival of Richard Rose Manson as Deputy Manager. Reportedly, Manson was accustomed to the system of coerced labor as he previously worked under the slave system in the cotton plantations of southern United States. William DeVoeux, Stipendiary Magistrate 1862-1867, in his celebrated letter to the Colonial Office, had charged that on the West Coast Demerara 'cruelties were being practiced on the immigrants, apparently without check or hindrance'. He cited a case where Manson was brought before him on a charge of assault and battery of an indentured worker. According to the evidence, Manson had 'knocked down' the worker for leaving work at 8:00 am on Sunday morning after 'having been at work, with the mere intermission of meals, from an early hour on the Saturday previously'. Such extended hours were clearly a violation of the labor laws which restricted factory labor to 10 hours a day. Additionally, on Sundays indentured workers were legally entitled to rest (Mangru, 2007; *Stabroek News* May 28, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> For more information, on the Sepoys, see Mahabir (2019: 17-32).

Mon Repos, Non Pariel, and at Vergenoegen. These disputes often had their genesis in the dissatisfaction with the worker's wages. The voice of labour became eloquent when the labourers went on strike and caused widespread concern among the plantocracy. Pulandar Khandi quoted the *Colonist* newspaper of 4 October 1869:

On most of the estates in this colony, there are between 300 and 400 immigrants overseers and a manager to which are allotted four overseers and a manager (5 white men to 400 Indians) many of whom are Sepoys who bore parts in the memorable tragedies of Cawnpore and Delhi.

While the planters were not above the law, they found expression in their authority, by abusing the tenets of the labour law. The Stipendiary Magistrate William Des Voeux, had reported that even 'the smallest peccadillo could not escape its meshes' (Des Voeux, 1948: 92). The estate managers had consequently turned a blind eye to the abuses. In 1871, a Commission was established to enquire into the charges which Des Voeux had made (Dodd, 1976: 7). When he appeared before the Commissioners, Des Voeux highlighted the provision of low wages, tasks, and work-hours, administration of justice, inadequate housing, and poor public health facilities. The indentured labourers frequently appeared before the magistrates for breaking a law, or willful indolence.

To the indentured labourer, it had become quite apparent that exposure to the tools of civilization, was not so much a privilege, but exposure to obvious exploitation. The planters were reluctant to comply with the recommendations of the 1871 Commission of Inquiry. Hence, there was a noticeable change, in the attitude of the sugar workers. The *Colonist* newspaper reported on 24 August 1872

During the past fortnight there have been several disturbances among the coolies, and it is becoming a very common practice with them to beat an Overseer to death or pummel a Manager within an inch of his life for some fancied wrong or assumed harshness...

Overseers on estates are beginning to refuse to go "aback" unless provided with revolvers, and thinking people are beginning to reflect that 50,000 people bound together by religion, prejudices and nationality may become a source of danger in a colony such as this, unless stern and prompt measures are taken to shew them that it is dangerous to provoke their masters.

In the face of overt exploitation, the Indian sugar workers complained frequently of deliberate abuse of the labour laws, assault, ill-treatment, and

poor wages. Some managers had boasted that 'the immigrants on their estates shall be always during the hours of work, either actually at work, or in hospital or in jail' (Ruhoman, 1998: 45, 53-60). They struck frequently, although Alan Adamson stated, that the planters referred to the strikes, as 'uprisings' or 'disturbances' (1972: 72; see also Kandhi, 1989: 3 and Ramnarine, 1979: 2). In October 1872, there was a 'riot' at Devonshire Castle on the Essequibo coast (*Colonist*, 1872),<sup>4</sup> and later at Eliza and Mary. There were strikes of a similar nature, about 1873 on the Uitvlugt estate.

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<sup>4</sup> The editor of the *Colonist* stated that the Devonshire Castle riot was not due to wages, but an innate desire to overthrow the whites. He said: 'It appears to admit of no question that the outbreak at Devonshire Castle was no mere wages dispute, but the commencement of an organized attempt at insurrection, planned and concerted by the large majority of the coolies of the district...there can scarcely be a doubt that the Coolies of the neighbouring estates were but waiting for the symptom of success on the part of their countrymen at Devonshire Castle also to rise.' Riot at Devonshire Castle <http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/chapter64.html> . On 28 September 1872, the Devonshire Castle workers went to the local magistrate and voiced their dissatisfaction with the rates of wages they were receiving. The magistrate, who was empowered to deal with labour disputes, promised to examine their complaints and to ensure that they obtained justice. However, the workers did not feel confident that anything would be done for them, and on their return to the estate they behaved in a disorderly manner. Some of them attempted to attack an overseer but others restrained them. Finally, the next day (29 September 1872) the labourers decided to strike in protest. Despite their action, the plantation management made little effort to listen to their complaints. But later that morning, they were asked by officials to appear at an inquiry four miles away at Danielstown Village; they refused to attend since they felt that their complaints would again be dismissed. By this time, most of them had already become very infuriated, and a large crowd armed with sticks, swarmed in an aggressive mood towards the overseers' compound from which the overseers and their families were forced to evacuate.

The African Guianese police were notified of the disorderly behaviour on the plantation, and 24 armed policemen under a police inspector arrived to face a riotous crowd of striking workers. Accompanying the policemen was the local magistrate who ordered the crowd to disperse, but as the strikers refused, he read the Riot Act. He gave them one hour in which to move away and return to their homes and warned that if they refused stern actions would be taken. He specifically appealed to the women and children to leave the area. Seeing the crowd was ignoring his orders, he advised the police inspector to place his men in such a position that they would not be surrounded. As the crowd became more rowdy, the inspector ordered the policemen to break up the mob. While they moved forward with their guns ready to shoot, the incensed crowd also advanced and attacked them with hackia sticks. The police then opened fire and five workers were killed, and seven others seriously injured. Those who died were Kaulica, Beccaroo, Maxidally, Baldeo and Auckloo.

One obvious example of the absence of collective bargaining, and abuse of power, was the 1913 Rose Hall riots<sup>5</sup>. The problem was exacerbated by low wages. Professor Hugh Tinker aptly described the status and condition of the Indian sugar worker as a ‘new system of slavery’ (1974).

Early in the twentieth century, the deplorable socio-economic conditions of rural Guiana grew worse. The price and demand for sugar plummeted. The causative factors were many. The owners of the plantations were therefore forced to reduce wages (Administrative Report 1922; see also Blue Book, 1926). In 1919, the average earnings were 48 cents per day, for men, and 29 to 30 cents for women. Table 1 provides wage details for 1922. This could scarcely cover \$2.88 a week, which was estimated as the cost of living for an Indian worker in British Guiana. The cost of living, which included food, clothing and implements, was around 32 cents a day in March 1922.

**Table 1: Wages, 1922**

Shovelmen	General	Average of 12
Shovelmen	47 cents	64 cents
Male weeders	41 cents	60 cents
Female weeders	34 cents	46 cents

(Source: Administrative report 1921)

The Colonial Office observed that it was a gross exaggeration to claim that the sugar industry in British Guiana was threatened with ‘total extinction’, claiming that for many years, sugar from British Guiana had enjoyed a preferential tariff which Canada had offered. They concluded that the policy of the Sugar Commission in the United Kingdom was to purchase sugar in the cheapest markets (Memorandum to Governor, 22 February 1921, from Governor of British Guiana to the Secretary of States for British colonies). In effect, they intimated that the sugar producers in British Guiana should explore alternative measures if they had intended to cushion the effects of the loss of their tradi-

<sup>5</sup> Here too, the police called on the threatening crowd to disperse, and the Riot Act was read. The policemen then arrested Ganga, and they were immediately attacked by the crowd with sticks and broken bottles. The police thereupon opened fire and 14 men in the crowd were killed. A Commissioner was appointed by the Governor to investigate the circumstances of the killings at Rose Hall. The Commissioner found that police did not inform the labourers very clearly whom they were about to arrest. He also stated that if they were told very clearly that the men who were to be transferred would not be removed by force, the tragic event would not have taken place. Despite this finding, no blame was placed on the police for the killings (*The Colonist*, 1913).

tional markets. Consequently, the laboring class resisted resolutely even in the face of bloody reprisals.

The African Guianese workers demanded improved working conditions and livable wages. They were employed as dockworkers, civil servants, taxi drivers, shop workers and even miners in the bauxite and gold industries.

### Evolution of the trade union movement

The year 1905 is significant in the history of the labour movement. On 29 November 1905, the stevedores struck for shorter working hours and higher wages. Sometimes dockers were not paid extra, even when they might have worked from morning to beyond 23:00 hours.

Disturbances erupted and spread as the dockers were supported by the estate workers, who were also dissatisfied with their abysmal conditions. The police fired on the Indian protesters from the Ruimveldt estate. They were on their way to Georgetown to join forces with the dissatisfied dockers. The police were supported by the presence of a war ship riding in port Georgetown.

The 1905 strike brought Hubert Critchlow to prominence.<sup>6</sup> He sought to channel the militancy of the working class in a positive direction through the settlement of employment disputes. The severe punishment that the striking workers received at the hands of the colonial authorities did not deter him from calling another strike the following year. The 1906 strike failed because strike-breakers were hired to work on the docks. There were also work stoppages on the sugar plantations between 1906 and 1916 (Chase, 1966: 37-42). The workers were not yet effectively organized; their consciousness not yet fully awakened, and their unity not yet fully formed.

In the following two extracts of the Administrative Reports of 1917, one observed the tentative steps towards collective bargaining by the Indian sugar workers:

- (1) On 25 January fifteen of the shovel gang of Plantation Ogle complained of the Rate for clearing the “middle-walk”. On being tested by the Manager the price was found low and was increased to a fair rate.
- (2) 21 February, the weeders of Plantation Success struck work, but resumed on the Manager raising the rate.

<sup>6</sup> Allow me, to credit Professor Hubert Devonish, for a detailed account of the personal life of Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow. Professor Devonish, in his response to me, had indicated that he had made audio recordings some 26 years ago and again three to four years ago, interviewing his mother, who died in 2018. She had lived with Hubert Critchlow for 10 years (Jagan, 2004: 73-110).

Hubert Critchlow led the stevedores on strike in March 1918. Bookers Brothers, the largest conglomerate in British Guiana, brought in strike-breakers from Barbados and Trinidad to unload the ships on the pretext that there was an epidemic in the Colony. The fact was that there had been an epidemic in the Colony but it had been effectively eliminated. The action of Booker Bros. had momentous consequences for the labour movement in British Guiana. It led to the formation of the British Guiana Labour Union on 11 January 1919. In the early years of the Labour Union, it represented the urban workers as well as the labourers on the sugar plantations.

There had been several attempts before 1919 to establish trade unions (Chase, 1966: 17-20). On 18 June 1921, an *Ordinance* to provide for the regulations and registration of trade unions was enacted in the colony. This *Ordinance* protected the trade union movement in British Guiana from the employers. It was more advanced than the 1917 trade union *Ordinance* of Jamaica, which left the trade unions in that colony to abuse. The British Guiana Labour Union was registered on 21 July 1922.

British Guiana had an agrarian economy based on sugar. Hence, market forces determined the cost of living in the colony. In 1920, the area under sugar cultivation decreased by 1,344 acres (Administrative Report, 1920). The sugar industry encountered serious economic problems due to a drop in prices because of the global economic depression. In addition, it confronted fierce competition for labour. Hence, the sugar industry had difficulty in recruiting workers from its former suppliers, as well as suffered the loss of revenue.

Since 1917, several factors made the recruitment of Indian labour difficult (*Report of the Commission of the Colony of British Guiana*, 1919). Firstly, the military authorities in India needed more labourers. In the second instance, weather conditions determined the number of labourers emigrating. During the war years, when there was an abnormal rainfall in India, fewer Indian labourers arrived in the colony because of the bountiful harvests in their country. Finally, British Guiana faced stiff competition from the Assam tea planters for labourers. These planters portrayed life on the Guianese sugar plantations as extremely oppressive. Hence, the Indian officials assigned the available labourers to the tea plantations (Administrative Report, 1917). The depressed economic conditions on the world market during the war years contributed to the decision of the Guianese planters to abolish Indian immigration to the colony in 1917.

Finally, a contributing factor to British Guiana as an unattractive destination for immigrants, were the unfavourable provisions of the five year indenture contracts, particularly in comparison with competing colonies asking for more Indian females, and paying better. A female labourer who was brought to British Guiana was offered a minimum wage of eight pence per day, and had to

agree to a five-year contract. This was undoubtedly a disincentive. On the other hand, in Trinidad, Indian women were offered twelve pence half penny per day as a minimum wage, about 50 per cent more, and the period of indenture had been reduced to three years.

There were reported incidents of molestation of Indian women, and widespread domestic violence on the plantations (Administrative Report, 1917). One read the phrase 'coolie wife murders' in the primary documents. The nature of the problem was so grave that the Assistant Colonial Secretary of British Guiana appealed to the Colonial Secretaries of Barbados, Trinidad, the Windward Islands, the Leeward Islands, Jamaica, and the Bahamas, for agricultural labour. He stated that 'owing to the discontinuance of indentured East Indian immigration to the colony the shortage of agricultural labour for the sugar estates is now acute' (G. Ball Greene to Colonial Secretaries, 1919). But with the exception of Barbados, the other colonies were unable to meet this demand for agricultural workers. They responded that they too had shortages.

The labour shortage on the sugar plantations was exacerbated by the exodus of Indian worker into the rice industry, which appeared to be more profitable. The sugar planters placed many obstacles in the path of the rice farmers. In 1907, the members of the Combined Court were advised to restrict rice farmers to growing one crop per year.

In 1917, the acreage under rice cultivation increased. 15,551,090 pounds of rice, valued at \$951,486, were exported. This promise of prosperity motivated more Indians to enter the rice industry. During 1919-20, the Government placed an embargo on the export of rice; this almost killed the industry. The cost of living rose and, on several occasions, labourers reacted violently. In 1921, the Immigration Agent reported: 'The depression in the price of sugar and its effect on wages led to considerable unrest in the early part of the year' (Administrative Report, 1921; See also Ramnarine, 1979).

Early in 1924, the British Guiana Labour Union requested equal wages for Indian labourers. The Union was strongly opposed to piece-work on the estates since it was stated that the managers could easily exploit the labourers. When the dock labourers and stevedore porters of Georgetown went on strike, they were supported by the urban working class and the workers on the plantations. This was the first time that the union used pickets. By 31 March, the protest had grown into a general strike (Report of Ruimveldt Commission of Enquiry 1924; Chase, 1966: 66-72).

The BGLU was under the constant surveillance of the Guianese Police Force. In his report on a public meeting which the union held during 1928, Police Constable Bobb reported that Mr. Gellab, an Indian member of the BGLU, informed a public meeting:

He is an East Indian but is appealing to the people to help and

build up the union for the union is the backbone of the colony with the poor just as well as the rich man and if the people are asleep they must be awakened, for they see that the government is doing with the sewerage. That is what is smashing the colony that is why the surtax and the Income Tax is coming in and getting worse daily because the government is not helping the poor man. (Inspector General of Police to Hon. Colonial Secretary, 1928).

The 1930s were very difficult years for the Union, and workers generally. This period witnessed several labour disputes throughout the Caribbean, and the formation of more trade unions. The main causative factors for the unrest in British Guiana and the West Indies were similar. The poor social conditions in the colonies had occurred after the drastic cuts in the main West Indian exports between 1928 and 1933. Consequently, workers were compelled to accept wage cuts, increased taxation, and inevitably face unemployment.

The under-employment of workers, combined with the economic depression, led to a drop in the membership of the BGLU. The membership had plummeted from 13,000, in 1919/1920 to 91 in 1935. The membership experienced severe hardship and were incapable of paying their dues.

The frustration of sugar workers erupted into violence on the plantations at La Bonne Intention, Leonora, Lusignan, Ogle, Farm and Berbice, during September and October 1935. Their main grievances were as follows:

- a) Neglect or refusal by management to inform workers of the rates to be paid for the task work before the commencement of work.
- b) Harsh and unsympathetic treatment of labourers by overseers and drivers.
- c) Fines for irregular attendance at work by labourers or their wives.
- d) Alteration in the method of marking punts for measurement of canes loaded.
- e) Insufficiency of lands given for cultivation of rice, ground provisions etc., and the high cost of lands.
- f) Inadequacy of wages generally.
- g) Long hours of work.

Hubert Critchlow appeared before the Commission of Enquiry which was established in 1936 to report on the disputes of 1935. He recommended that the Government establish a Conciliatory Board, or Trade Board, to avoid strikes on the estates.

After the 1935 strike, factory men from the estates at Lusignan and La Bonne Intention became members of the BGLU. The membership increased to

93. Critchlow suggested that the enactment of the *Workmen's Compensation Bill* had led the workers to join the union. This view was convincing because the union would have increased its membership if it could convince workers that being organized would be to their advantage. But the membership of the Union continued to be woefully small.

Although the BGLU had organized the East Indian sugar workers in the early period of its existence, the union did not make any significant inroad among the sugar workers. In fact in 1921, there were 2,000 East Indian members in the union. However, Critchlow was known to say on occasions that, 'If you don't like this union, go ahead and form your own union, but for God's sake get organized'.

Alfred Athiel Thorne, a Barbadian by birth, organized the second trade union, the *British Guiana Workers' League* in 1931. He had been a former member of the executive of the BGLU. Dr. Jung Bahadur Singh, a member of the Legislative Council, became the union's senior Vice-President.<sup>7</sup> The union represented the interests of factory workers of the sugar estates, municipal workers in Georgetown, and ward-maids at the Georgetown Hospital. But the membership was always small, rarely exceeding 1,000.

With the assistance of Hubert Critchlow, Ayube Mohammed Edun, an Indian labor activist, and Charles Ramkisson, Jacob organized the *Man Power Citizen's Association* (MPCA) in 1936. Edun and Jacob were known, for their advocacy of Indian-Guyanese political rights. They were founder members of the British Guiana East Indian Association.<sup>8</sup> Edun was described as eccentric, and had promoted the idea of a new world-wide social order, which would be led by the intelligentsia. Jacob was a former sugar estate chauffeur and bookkeeper, and a prominent businessman, who had been a member of the Legislative Council since 1935 (Ramharack, 2005: 92).

The MPCA surpassed the BGLU in membership by 1937. This union concentrated its activities mainly among the sugar workers. It represented mainly the field workers. The founders made no attempt to organize the workers in Georgetown. It was the first sugar workers union. However, it was not recognized by the Sugar Producers' Association.

The Man-Power Citizens Association was registered on 5 November

<sup>7</sup> 'Dr. Jung Bahadur Singh, O.B. E., was also an outstanding Indo-Guyanese politician who served in the Legislative Council from 1931 to 1953. He was a Medical Doctor, President of the Santa Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS) and the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA) and "*Vickram*" of the Guianese Hindu community (Ramharack, 2005: 3).

<sup>8</sup> The British Guiana East Indian Association, was the brain child of Joseph Ruhoman of Berbice. It was established in 1916 in New Amsterdam (Ramharack, 2005: 92).

1937 (Chase, 1966: 85-90; Lewis, 2013; Chaison and Nageer 1998: xi-xii). The first executive of the MPCA were Ayube Edun, President, and Harri Barron, General Secretary. The other officers were Edward Pile, R.N. Persaud, J.R.Singh, T.R.King, O. Ashby, Seemangal Maraj and, O.N. Persaud. Miss Eleanor Sewdin, was the first female in the executive team, elected Vice President, and later Treasurer. Many of the members were Indians. In 1945, Cheddi Jagan became the Treasurer. After, serving for one year he resigned over differences in policy (Jagan, 2004: 65).

By 1939, six unions were registered under the *Trade Union Ordinance*. Table 2 provides the details on their registrations.

**Table 2: Registered Trade Unions in 1939**

	Unions	Date of registration
1.	The British Guiana Labour Union	21 July 1922
2.	The British Guiana Workers' League	28 January 1931
3.	Man Power Citizens' Association	5 November 1937
4.	The British Guiana Seamen's Union	16 January 1938
5.	The Transport Workers' Union of British Guiana	23 March 1938
6.	The British Guiana Post Office Workers Union	3 June 1938

On 21 November 1938, Charles Jacobs, a member of the MPCA, and John Lucie Griffith, a member of the BGLU, had accompanied Hubert Critchlow to the British Guiana and West Indian Labour Congress held in Trinidad. The Immigration officers detained Critchlow. One of the Immigration officers said that Critchlow would not be allowed entry into the island 'owing to the existence of a deportation order...'. Critchlow wrote to the Secretary of the Royal Commission (Critchlow, 1938). Jacobs and Griffith conveyed the news to the President of the Congress, Arthur Ciprani, who contacted the Government; Critchlow was allowed to land in the afternoon.

The delegates at the British Guiana and West Indies Labour Congress Conference passed a number of resolutions. The members recommended a minimum wage of \$6 per 5½ day working week for adult male agricultural workers and \$4.80 for adult female workers. They also recommended that workers should be allowed to acquire plots of land, and cattle, pigs and poultry, to support their families. It was proposed that in cases where task work was done, the wages for the tasks should be calculated on a basis which would approximate those paid to the weekly agricultural workers.

The Conference had also proposed self-government, with adult suffrage, in the West Indian colonies. The trade unionists recommended the following:

- a) Purely elective legislature.
- b) Qualification for elected members to be solely on an educational basis.
- c) An Executive Council to be elected by the members of the legislature.
- d) The Legislative Council to elect its own President.
- e) The constitutional position and relation of the Governor to the legislature to be similar to that of the King to exercise the King's prerogatives on the advice of the Executive Council (*Daily Chronicle* 4 December 1938).

The members also called for the nationalization of the sugar industry. These recommendations were submitted in 1939 to the West India Royal Commission of Enquiry (Chaired by Lord Moyne), after labour unrest had occurred in the colonies. The Commission was sent to investigate the prevailing conditions in West Indies, British Guiana, and British Honduras.

While the West India Royal Commission was interviewing delegations in Georgetown, a strike occurred on the Leonora estate. Roberta Kilkenny observed that Leonora 'had a long history of worker militancy' (Walker-Kilkenny, 1992: 4). The strike of August 1869 in Leonora for higher wages was assumed to be 'probably the most serious Indian indentured uprising' (Walker-Kilkenny, 1992: 4). In 1909, more than one hundred indentured labourers left the plantation for Georgetown to demand livable wages. The Immigration Officer at Vreed-en-Hoop prevented any further escalation in the protest action and addressed the grievances of the workers.

The immediate cause of the February 1939 Leonora strike was the rate of pay. The dis-satisfied workers expressed concern that the management dismissed their grievances. The shovel men had claimed that their wages were inadequate, and had requested an increase. The punt leaders had alleged that the mode of loading the punts was irregular.

Up to 1938, the government and employers were still hostile to collective bargaining. There was no provision in the constitution for the workers to participate actively in the legislature and to be clearly represented (Walker-Kilkenny, 1992: 5). Although the MPCA did not have a branch at Leonora, the workers had called for Ayube Edun, President of the MPCA, to negotiate on their behalf. In 1939, the MPCA had a membership of around 10,000 members. The Plantation administration refused to allow Edun and Jacob to enter the estate. The workers were told that Edun could have a meeting with them on the public road. Edun waited for the recognition from the Sugar Producers' Association (SPA). Jacob subsequently informed the strikers that he would settle

their dispute at a later date because he had to appear before the Moyne Commission. Jacob had always promoted negotiation and conciliation over the strike weapon.

The dismayed workers became rowdy, and police responded violently. The exchange between workers and the policemen was fatal. Four strikers including one woman, Sumintra, were killed, and four others wounded by gun shot (Walker-Kilkenny, 1992: 7).<sup>9</sup> One police officer was wounded.

After the Leonora sugar workers' strike in 1939, membership in the MPCA began to increase significantly, passing the 20,000 mark in 1943, making it the largest union in the country. In March 1939, the Sugar Producers' Association, the organization for sugar estate owners, officially recognized the union.

The MPCA advocated for constitutional reform, adult suffrage, an elected majority in the legislature, payment for representatives, security of tenure for estate workers, legislation to permit peaceful picketing, and the extension of workmen's compensation to cover agriculture workers. The organ of the union was the *Guiana Review*, which was later renamed, the *Labour Advocate* (Dalgety, 2009: 19).

Among the recommendations of the Moyne Commission was that the government should extend the franchise by reducing substantially the qualifications for registration of a voter and those for membership of the Legislative Council. It also recommended that

... As regards Trade Unionism, the enactment, where they are not already in force, of laws to protect unions from actions for damages consequent on strikes, the legislation of peaceful picketing (pickets being given access in reasonable numbers to workers both at the gates of the factories and at their homes), the compulsory registration of Trade Union and audit of their funds (the latter duty could be undertaken free of charge by Government) (Chase, 1976: 69).

In 1941 (8 April), the BGLU, the British Guiana Congress of General Workers, the Moulders and Mechanics and the British Guiana Sawyers Union, organized and registered the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in British Guiana for

<sup>9</sup> See also Khan (1939). Weeder and alleged protest leader Sumintra was one of four striking workers killed at Plantation Leonora, West Coast Demerara, by colonial police for demonstrating against low pay and poor working conditions on her post-indenture sugar plantation. Sumintra, a Rajput woman was neither the first nor last Indo-Guianese woman to play a role in anticolonial labour strikes or lose her life protesting on sugar estates in the interwar and post-World War II pre-independence periods.

the first time. The first President was A.A. Thorne and the Secretary was H.N. Critchlow. However, the BGTUC was short lived. The organization, failed mainly because of disagreement over the rules.

Governor Sir Gordon Lethem arrived in British Guiana in 1943. He introduced a new *Labour Ordinance*. He also amended the constitution, and provided for the appointment of two labour representatives to the Legislative Council. The African representative Hubert Critchlow and the Indian representative Ayube Edun became the appointed members (Ramharack, 2005: 92). However, with their appointment in the legislature, the popularity of Critchlow and Edun began to diminish. Some sections of the Guianese society viewed the nominations as a gag on labour. The new nominated Legislators had a hostile reception in the legislature. An examination of the official documents clearly emphasized the ethnicity of the members of the two unions. It was an admission that the trade unions were divided by race. In 1942, the government of British Guiana passed a law allowing peaceful picketing.

Many of the recommendations which the TUC had made were included in the amended Workmen's Compensation Bill 1947. It was implemented on 1 January 1948.

The *Factories Bill 1947*, sub-titled 'An Ordinance to provide for the registration and regulation of factories, had most of the provisions in it already incorporated in the Bakers (Hours of Work) Ordinance, which was passed in 1946.

It now appeared that trade unionism in the colony was acknowledged as an effective mobilizer of Guianese workers. Trade union leaders had received the support of influential members of the establishment. With this support, they were emboldened to actively participate in politics and national elections.

During 1947, a committee comprising Hubert Critchlow, Alfred Thorne, Ashton Chase, Dr. Claude Denbow, Robert Hart, John Carter, Osmond Lucas, Edun Shakoor, union heads of the Benefit Society, David Harper, Broomes, and other trade union leaders, demanded adult suffrage. Critchlow was delegated to present the recommendation to the Secretary of State, Creech Jones. He refused to grant adult suffrage, but asked for a figure that would represent a minimum wage as a qualifier for suffrage. The figure was accepted and the franchise fee was reduced from \$40.00 to \$10.00 per month. Literacy of one's language was also accepted as a requirement. In the 1947 election, the franchise requirement was within the reach of all adult voters except housewives. The movement towards decolonization intensified with the formation of the British Guiana Labour Party.



## British Guiana Labour Party

The British Guiana Labour Party was established in 1947. The party comprised the BGLU, the Cosmopolitan Workers' Union, the British Guiana Workers League, the British Guiana League of Coloured Peoples, the British Guiana East Indian Association, and other working class organizations. The objective of the founders of the BGLP was to introduce mass education, which in their estimation, would help to eliminate the disunity which existed in the community (*The Weekly Herald*, 17 August 1947). They contended that the Party was the only real Labour party in local politics because it had crossed racial and ethnic boundaries. The colonial government officials as well as the planters resented the entry of the newly established party. The officers of the BGLP included General Secretary of the BGLU, Hon. Hubert Critchlow, President and Vice President of the MPCA, Senior Vice President Hon. Charles Jacob.

In the next Legislative Council election, the BGLP won 6 seats. The MPCA nominated 7 candidates, to contest the 14 seats but none of its candidates won. This was an unmitigated disaster for the union.

Governor Charles Woolley acknowledged the presence of labour in the 'House'. He emphasized that

This should not be regarded as a substitute for a healthy and responsible trade union movement, the fundamental aims of which were to secure improved conditions of work and wages and security to its members (*The Weekly Herald*, 21 December 1947).

Earlier, on 6 November 1946, Dr. Cheddi Jagan and his wife established the *Political Affairs Committee*. Cheddi Jagan contested the 1947 elections as an independent candidate and won (Ramharack, 2005: 3-4). Hubert Critchlow was unseated for the libelous statements he had made during the political campaign. The voice of labour was almost inaudible when Critchlow was removed from the legislature (*The Weekly Herald*, 21 December 1947). Shortly after Dr. Jagan entered the Legislative Council. There, he attempted to align himself with the Labour Party. However, after disagreement on several issues they parted (Jagan, 2004: 74).

The Guiana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU), was established on 10 March 1946 and registered on 5 April 1948, as the 49<sup>th</sup> union. The founders were Dr. Joseph Prayag Latchmansingh and Amos Rangela.

After the 1947 election, Dr. J. P. Latchmansingh and Dr. Cheddi Jagan led

the Guiana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU).<sup>10</sup> The main objective was to weaken the control of the MPCA in the sugar belt because of the patronage of the Sugar Producers Association. The poor showing of the MPCA at the 1947 election contributed to its loss of stature on the sugar plantations. There was a paradigm shift with the rise of the GIWU. The new union did its best work among the women.

The President of the GIWU was Dr. J.P. Latchmansingh. In 1948, the GIWU became the leading union on the sugar estates, after the 'cut and load' issue, as opposed to 'cut and drop', on the Enmore estate. The strike started on 22 April 1948 and continued until 16 June 1948. The strikers demanded a living wage and objected to the increased work load. They advanced on the factory and were met by a contingent of African-Guyanese policemen. The combatants were prevented from advancing. The strikers were incapable of shielding the combatants. As they retreated, five Indian sugar workers were killed and 14 wounded; those killed were Rambarran, Lall also known as Pooran, Lallabagee Kisson, Surujballi, and Harri (Rose, 1994: 6; Ramharack, 2005: 97; Jagan, 2004: 94). One policeman was seriously injured.

The procession from Enmore to the cemetery included Balram Singh Rai, Dr. Cheddi Jagan, his wife Janet Jagan, Dr. J.P. Latchmansingh, Daniel Debidin, Jung Bahadur Singh, Jai Narine Singh, Amos Rangela, Mrs. Jane Phillips-Gay, Sydney King, along with Alfred David, and other officials.

Governor Charles Woolley appointed the Boland Commission of Inquiry, to report on the 1948 Enmore strike, and make recommendations. The Commissioners were Frederick M. Boland, Chairman, S.L. Van Battenburg Stafford, and R.S. Persaud. They concluded that while the police were justified in opening fire on the advancing mob they should have made use of tear gas.

In October 1948, the Secretary of State for the Colonies appointed a Commission to enquire 'into and report on the organization' of the sugar industry in British Guiana, with particular reference to means of production, wages and working conditions', and to make recommendations (Rose, 1982; Chase, 1966: 152). The recommendations paid specific attention to the treatment of the female labourers (particularly lactating mothers, and those who needed day care for their children), race and employment, child labour, the working hours, absence of social security, public health, malnutrition, health care, hospital services, housing,

<sup>10</sup> Sugar workers had become disillusioned with the MPCA, which offered little resistance to the SPA. During a strike in the same month, the MPCA urged strikers to return to work, claiming their demands would be discussed with the SPA. However, strikers ignored the call, despite the SPA saying they would only deal with the MPCA as the only recognized union. By the end of 1948, the GIWU had the support of the majority of sugar workers.

potable water, the quality of education, race and teacher training, labour welfare, sports, rum drinking, race and culture, and religion.

In 1948, 27.8% of the field labourers were females. Indian women dominated the female labour force on the plantations, as weeders. The low levels of their education barred them from specialized employment as agriculturists. In 1931, there were 17,210 male agriculturists and 5,688 females (33%). Table 3 shows the gender composition of the workforce in Guyanese sugar estates between 1939 and 1954.

**Table 3: Workers employed on sugar estates  
(Average number of workers employed weekly, 1939-1954)**

Year	Men	Women	Total
1939	17,892	7,890	25,782
1940	18,921	7,794	26,715
1941	17,613	7,447	25,060
1942	14,516	5,840	20,356
1943	13,539	5,807	19,393
1944	13,243	6,150	19,382
1945	13,617	5,765	19,675
1946	13,734	5,923	21,297
1947	15,087	6,210	20,118
1948	14,516	5,602	20,333
1949	14,721	5,612	20,333
1950	14,849	5,665	20,514
1951	15,103	5,474	20,577
1952	15,435	5,274	20,709
1953	14,521	4,754	19,275
1954	15,994	4,900	20,894

(Source: Department of Agriculture, 1961)

The SPA refused to recognize the GIWU. The MPCA survived, due to international funding and the Colonial administration's stance against Cheddi Jagan's public admission that he was Marxist-Leninist. Due to the intense fear of communism, the Americans, through the American Federation of Labour Congress of Industrial Organization (AFLCIO), donated funds to the MPCA led TUC. The exclusive treatment of the MPCA alienated field workers.

No other group was more conscious of the importance of a trade union than the sugar workers. By 1946, the unions which represented the sugar workers were the British Guiana Workers' League, the Man Power Citizens Association, Demerara Overseers' Association, the British Guiana and West Indian Sugar Boilers Union, the British Guiana Drivers Association, and the Sugar Estates Clerks Association, which was later renamed the National Association of Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial Employees.

The impact of the organization of the sugar workers was evidenced in the 1953 election when all ten constituencies where the sugar estates were established voted for the first mass based political party in British Guiana, the People Progressive Party (PPP). The officials of the MPCA did not vote for the PPP. However, the rank and file members voted for the PPP. The party won 18 of the 24 parliamentary seats in the general elections that were held on 27 April 1953.

The Ministers of the new government included Premier Dr. Cheddi Jagan, President of the Sawmill and Forest Workers' Union; Dr. Latchmarsingh, President of GIWU; Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham, President of British Guiana Labour Union, and Ashton Chase, Assistant Secretary of BGLU. The magnitude of the contribution of labour was not lost on the 1953 PPP administration. Labour and politics had become inextricably linked. Mrs. Jane Phillips-Gay polled 62.5 % of the votes in the sugar constituency. When she was a member of the Domestic Workers' Union, her brother, James Phillips, had invited her to speak on J.P. Latchmarsingh's platform. He made her a formidable force in the trade union movement, as he pursued his political career. In 1949, Gay was appointed the General Secretary of the Guyana Industrial Workers Union (GIWU).

Gay was always concerned about the plight of the female workers; she ventilated their grievances. From a public health perspective, poor hygiene and the chemicals in the water endangered the health of female workers on the sugar estates who worked in the cane fields and stood in the water for hours (Woolford, 2000: 124-6).

The May Day parade of 1953 was the largest ever held in British Guiana. 20,000 persons attended the rally at Bourda Green (renamed Merriman Mall). The President of BGLU promised the crowd that the government would work towards raising the standard of living of the employed poor. During August 1953, the GIWU had called a 'recognition' strike. It was suggested that this strike was a contributing factor in the decision of the British Government to suspend the Waddington constitution. Secondly, the Minister of Labour had tabled a motion for the introduction of the *Labour Relations Bill*, which sought to make it compulsory for unions which had the support and confidence of the workers, to be recognized. This Bill was modelled on the Wagner

Act of the United States of America, and had been implemented in the United Kingdom. It was passed on 8 October.<sup>11</sup> The PPP government was ousted from political office on 9 October, after 133 days. It was alleged that the Ministers were communists, and threatened to disrupt the stability of the country.

By April 1955, a large number of organized trade unions remained unaffiliated to the Trade Union Council. These included the Government employee unions, the GIWU, the BGLU, the Municipal Trade Union, and the Sawmill Workers Union. A dispute arose as a consequence of the refusal of the TUC to accept any trade union which was affiliated to the Caribbean Labour Congress or the World Federation of Trade Unions. These were considered communist organizations.<sup>12</sup> The Interim government was accused of instigating the expulsion of the 'red unions', from the TUC.

The TUC was led by the MPCA, which received the support of the Department of Labour and the Interim government. In fact, it was described as an arm of the MPCA since it comprised 40% of the TUC. Mohammed Shakoor, Secretary of the MPCA, and active member of the ailing TUC, was instrumental in having the organization affiliated with the western sponsored International Confederation of Free Trade Union (ICFTU). One of the unfortunate consequences of this 'split' was that whenever the 'red' unions struck for higher wages, or demanded better working conditions, the TUC, was not supportive. The MPCA controlled the TUC up to the first half of the 1970s.

The British labour movement was concerned that strikes were used as a political weapon, and was uneasy over the dependency of the MPCA on American funding. Andrew Dalglish reported in May 1955, 'I had not been long in Georgetown before complaints were made about the MPCA'; while George Woodcock who supervised the Dalglish mission, recorded 'it must be admitted that the MPCA was weak and in some districts unpopular and the rival GIWU does undoubtedly possess the support of many sugar workers'. In 1955, Rupert Tello replaced Lionel Luckhoo as President of the MPCA.

<sup>11</sup> The 'PPP introduced and passed a Labor Relations Bill, providing for union recognition and for settling questions of union representation by tallying the votes of workers at the production point' (Chaison & Nageer, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> In 1945, when Critchlow attended the West Indian trade union conference in Barbados, it was decided to rename the British West Indies and Guianese Labour Congress, the Caribbean Labour Congress (CLC). It was at this congress, that the trade union leaders decided to renew their call for the formation of a wages board, a universal eight-hour work day, a federation of West Indian trade unions, and a political union of the West Indies. The first President of the Caribbean Labour Congress was Sir Grantley Adams.

On 20 May 1956, The BGTUC requested the Officer Administering the Government to meet a delegation from the organization to discuss the proposal that May Day, should be declared a public holiday. In May 1958, Rupert Tello, a former President of the MPCA, tabled a motion in the Legislative Council that May 1 be declared a public holiday in British Guiana. Richard Ishmael was President of the MPCA, and subsequently President of the BGTUC. During his term as President of the TUC, he had accessed funding from the Americans.

The sugar workers were still dissatisfied with the representation of the MPCA. The rank and file members voted for the PPP. They formed the Guyana Sugar Workers Union (GSWU) in 1961, with support, from the Jagan government. It was founded in 1946 as the Guiana Industrial Workers' Union. After failing in the 1950s, it was reformed as the Guyana Sugar Workers' Union in 1961, but changed its name to Guyana Agricultural Workers' Union in 1962 before becoming GAWU later that decade. The President of the Union was Harry Lall. He led the struggle for recognition, in place of the MPCA in 1964. On 26 February 2020 GAWU celebrated 44 years of its existence.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The Indian indentured labourers' struggle for reasonable wages, and improved living conditions and social justice began from protests to organized workers' representatives. Generally, the response of the Colonial Administrators to the distress of the workers was based on race and ethnicity. It was disturbing to see the use of African Guianese police officers to quell the Indian led strikes that took place on the sugar plantations.

The problem of division of the workers was exacerbated with the appointment of Hubert Critchlow and Ayube Edun, as nominated members of the Legislative council. Critchlow lost the respect of the young trade unionists, who had used the BGLU, in their quest for political power. Edun's union, the MPCA di-

<sup>13</sup> A GAWU Press Release on 26 February 2020 titled '44 years since GAWU was recognized bargaining agent of field and factory sugar workers', stated: '[a]s the GAWU observes this milestone we recall the inspiring chapters of workers struggle. We also recall the contribution of our leaders especially Dr Cheddi Jagan, who as Honorary President of the GAWU, provided leadership, guidance and advice during those difficult days and nights. We remember those comrades-in-arms who stood with the GAWU and defended the workers against the machinations they faced and eventually overcame. Today, our Union has a proud and rich history which now spans now over seventy (70) years in defence of workers and advancement of their rights and conditions. The leader of the union in 2020, is Mr. Komal Chand'.

minished in numbers, and in spite of the patronage of the Colonial Administration and the injection of foreign funding, it was unable to regain its dominance in the sugar industry.

As the MPCA lost its dominance in the sugar belt, GIWU, and later GAWU, established its status as the bargaining agents of the sugar workers. The militancy of the Indian sugar workers was channeled into organized labour, and ultimately political power. Trade unionists were appointed diplomats, for example, Sir Lionel Luckhoo was appointed High Commissioner to the United Kingdom in the Burnham era, Dr. Nanda Gopal was appointed the Minister of Labour in the Donald Ramotar administration (3 December 2011 – 16 May 2015). Komal Chand, who the PPP/C appointed as the President of GAWU, became a Member of Parliament; he served for twenty years, dying on 8 April, 2020 while receiving medical treatment in Cuba.

The MPCA, the first registered Indian trade union, literally fought for its survival after it had gained recognition. Indian organized labour campaigned for the social protection of workers who had fought and died for comfortable housing, livable wages, medical facilities, education for all, abolition of child labour, and community centers. From the MPCA to GAWU, there was a long struggle for the recognition by the SPA. Evidently, the recognition was bought at a price. The MPCA had never regained its status, among sugar workers, and GAWU was labelled as pro-communist and pro-Jagan. After several recognition strikes, GAWU became the official representative of the sugar workers. Racism, ideology, and ethnicity continued to bedevil organized labour and the Indian sugar workers although they had succeeded in achieving universal adult suffrage.

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