

**Walter Rodney's
Political Praxis:
The Guyana Years 1974 - 78**

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Abstract

Walter Rodney's impact on Guyana's politics and society can be divided into three broad periods: 1974-78, when, after being denied employment at the University of Guyana, he worked tirelessly to help build the Working People's Alliance (WPA) and mobilize, educate and inspire the Guyanese people towards a new political culture; 1979-80, the last year of his life, when he and the WPA led a mass rebellion that transformed the political landscape and almost toppled the government; and 1980-92; when the movement that he inspired continued to utilize his ideas to bring about the demise of the authoritarian regime. This paper looks at the first period by doing three things. First, it looks at Rodney's dramatic reentry to Guyana and seeks to answer the question: Why did he almost instantly appeal to the Guyanese people, despite living outside of the country for all of his adult life? Second, it discusses Rodney's thoughts on politics and resistance in Guyana. Third, it looks at the pre-party WPA and its application of Rodney's ideas between 1974 and 1978.

1 Introduction

When Walter Rodney returned to Guyana in 1974 he had already developed a reputation as a radical scholar-revolutionary. After being banned from Jamaica in 1968 for his "radical activities," he left for Tanzania where he continued to be critical of neo-colonialism in the Third World. While teaching in Jamaica at the University of the West Indies, Rodney's "groundings" with the working poor of Jamaica had begun to attract the attention of the government. So, when he attended a Black Writers' Conference in Montreal, Canada, in October 1968, the Hugh Shearer-led Jamaican Labor Party government banned him from re-entering the country. This action sparked widespread riots and revolts in Kingston in which several people were killed and injured by the police and security forces, and millions of dollars worth of property destroyed.

Having been expelled from Jamaica, he returned to Tanzania after a short stay in Cuba. There he lectured from 1968 to 1974 and continued his groundings in Tanzania and other parts of Africa. This was the period of the African liberation struggles and Walter, who fervently believed that

the intellectual should make his or her skills available for the struggles and emancipation of the people, became deeply involved. It was partly from these activities that his second major work, and his best known — *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* - emerged.

He had decided to return to Guyana partly because he wanted to practically contribute to the struggle of the oppressed, to give life to what he had been preaching in a space in which he could not be deemed an outsider. So he himself may have been surprised when in 1974, the University of Guyana's academic board decision to appoint him as head of the History department was overturned by the PNC-controlled University Board. Hamilton Greene, a top government functionary, actually moved the motion to rescind the appointment on the grounds that Rodney was a security risk (Kwayana 1988).

The African Society for Cultural Relations with Independent Africa (ASCRIA), an Africanist organization headed by Eusi Kwayana, one of the leaders of the independence movement, responded by organizing a protest which took the form of mass rallies held mainly in Georgetown and the East Coast Demerara in October-November 1974. Roopnarine, correctly, asserts that Walter Rodney "before he set his foot in Guyana was a force for unity" (CaribNation: November 1998). ASCRIA invited most of the opposition parties and pressure groups along with noted individuals to participate in the protest. Kwayana (1988) confirms that although all groups were welcome, particular efforts were made to enlist the participation of the Indian dominated People's Progressive Party (PPP) to give the protest a multiracial character. The first rally, held in Georgetown on October 5, drew a crowd estimated at 3,000 while the others ranged from 500 to 2,000 participants. A top regional newspaper compared the rallies to those held in 1953 when the independence movement was united (Caribbean Contact: December 1974), an observation supported by Kwayana (1988:20), who quoted others as saying: "It was like 1953 both in size and multiracial composition," a reference to the multiracial PPP that captured the imagination of the multiracial masses and swept the polls of that year.

Obviously, surprised by the large crowds and the multi-racial nature of the rallies, the PNC responded by attempting to physically prevent them from taking place. Its activists heckled the speakers and engaged in confrontations with sections of the audiences. Particular attention was paid to the fact that Cheddi Jagan, the PPP leader, and Kwayana were appearing on the same platform for the first time in two decades. Kwayana confirms that the PNC was taken by surprise.

Its thugs were unprepared for this public response and had to confine themselves to heckling with racist jibes at the fact that Cheddi Jagan and I had appeared on the same platform after about 21 years—with the exception of a single protest meeting in 1968 protesting the banning of C.Y. Thomas from Jamaica (1988:6).

Rodney, from 1974 until his untimely assassination in 1980, became a pivotal force in the country's politics. When he returned to Guyana in 1974 the country was at a critical juncture. First, the ruling Peoples National Congress (PNC) had just instituted its "Declaration of Sophia", which declared the PNC party paramount to the state. This declaration marked the culmination of a decade of transition from a liberal authoritarian political order left by the British to a more dictatorial authoritarianism achieved largely through rigged elections and the undermining of civil liberties. The USA's Cold War policy of keeping communist parties such as the opposition People's Progressive Party (PPP) out of power was also a major contributor to the PNC's ability to consolidate power.

Second, while there was opposition to the PNC, it was fragmented along racial and ideological lines. The PPP, a communist party with an Indian base, opposed the PNC from the left but could not find common ground with either the other African left wing groups largely for racial reasons or the conservative groups for ideological reasons. Since the government did not face a united opposition movement, it was able to consolidate its hold on power with relative ease. Third, the country's racial polarization meant that the PNC was generally able to hold on to the support and loyalty of its African-Guyanese base, despite the government's anti-people policies. This African Guyanese support was crucial in affording the PNC government some degree of legitimacy.

It was in this atmosphere that Rodney decided to stay in Guyana despite the denial of employment. While the protest organized by ASCRIA did not force the government to overturn its decision, it marked the birth of a significant period in Guyana's politics. First, it provided the opportunity for those dissatisfied with the government's growing authoritarianism to openly demonstrate their disapproval. Significantly it was the first time that African Guyanese in the capital city, Georgetown, had taken part in any large-scale protest against the PNC. Second, it took to a higher level the Indian-African solidarity that was first demonstrated during the Land for the Landless campaign organized in 1973 by ASCRIA and supported by the Indian Revolutionary People's Associates (IPRA), led by Moses Bhagwan. Third, the protest was the prelude to the announcement in November 1974 of the formation of the Working People's Alliance which served as Rodney's organizational base and a potent medium for the transformation of the country's politics. Finally, it encouraged Rodney to remain in Guyana. According to him, "Partly I wish to remain as a matter of personal preference, to be here with my family and friends, and partly because my situation is not unique. It is part of a very widespread economic victimization, which has developed in Guyana" (Rodney 1976:118). His presence was to have a tremendous influence on the resistance to authoritarian rule in particular and the country's politics in general over the next six years. He became, as Kwayana (1988:8) observes, the one "chosen by the people, in spite of himself and his philosophy, to lead the struggle against the dictatorship". Elaborating on his personal role in a 1980 interview Rodney observed:

In my own career I have had tremendous good fortune to be exposed to people's struggles in the rest of the Caribbean, particularly in Jamaica, to see Black people struggle in Britain against racism, to participate by proxy and sometimes coming in occasionally with the struggles of Black people in the U.S. in having a very meaningful experience in knowing what it is like to combat imperialism and racism in Southern Africa starting from the Tanzanian base, which, for many years, has been the headquarters of the struggle in Southern Africa. I think I have benefited enormously from those experiences, and in some way or other, I have to try to regenerate that experience with what is happening in Guyana. It doesn't do the Guyanese people any good if that's simply locked away as an element of my own personal development, and I might begin to question myself and doubt my own conclusions and my credibility if, in a situation which requires a certain type of action, it is dictated logically by a mode of analysis and I shirk from that action. (Rodney 1980)

2 Why Did Rodney Instantly Connect With the People?

Why did Rodney almost instantly appeal to the Guyanese people despite living outside of the country for all of his adult life? The answer lies partly in the fact that he had already in his short life acquired international fame as a first-rate scholar. His book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* had revolutionized the study of African history and society. Second, at a time when the peoples of the formerly colonized world, especially in Africa and the Caribbean, were coming to the realization that political independence had not fulfilled the promise of liberation, Rodney's stand on their side, his belief that another world was possible and his commitment to fight for it differentiated him from most of the educated class. Third, Rodney was returning to a Guyana that was beginning to grapple with the question of its racial division. Eusi Kwayana's break with the PNC in 1971 had brought to the fore the class contradictions within the African Guyanese community and opened the door for solidarity across racial lines. When he and ASCRIA sought common ground with Moses Bhagwan's IPRA in the form of the Land for the Landless campaign in 1973, it became clear that racial unity was possible. The foundation for Rodney's platform was thus created before he returned.

Rodney arrived in Guyana amidst great expectations. That he was not tainted by the politics of the past was a great asset. Kwayana (1988:6) observes that these expectations were universal and in some cases self serving:

Rodney, therefore, returned with an abundance of goodwill for him in his country. The various sections though, had various expectations of him. The

revolutionary working people wanted him to take, and expected that he would take their side in the political struggle. The still comfortable middle class merely wanted him accepted as an educator at the University of Guyana so that he could teach their children. Some even wanted him installed there at the head of the History department in the hope that it would keep him out of the political struggle. His support extended across racial distinctions. Those who fear struggle are not confined to any one ethnic classification.

The question of Rodney's instant connection with the Guyanese people is partly answered by the insights of three of his close colleagues. Kwayana (1988:2) locates it in what he calls "the consciousness of the working people and marginally to that of other social groups which play and have always played a key role in the forward movement in our countries." He elaborates on this theme:

There has always been something in the Guyanese understanding of life that responds to outstanding scholars. This is true of most formative economies. There is particularly an even stronger something that responds to the victim of oppression. When outstanding scholarship and victim are both combined in the same person, the size and weight of the response rise accordingly. This was the case with Walter Rodney. (p.2)

Kwayana is of course referring to Rodney being the victim of the government's highhandedness in denying him the right to work. But Rodney's work and activities in Jamaica and Tanzania had not gone unnoticed in the country of his birth; his heroism in Jamaica and Africa was known to the people. As Andaiye explains:

I always thought that he had captured people's imaginations before he came back. Think of how we heard of him...How we heard of him was by radio and newspaper and word- of-mouth-that he was thrown out of Jamaica. You had this sense, even me who had known him since child- hood-and certainly a lot of people I knew who were younger had this sense too-of him as a person who acted in ways that made governments afraid. These are not people who began by reading How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. These are people who first heard of Walter Rodney via, say, mutual friends who were in Jamaica. There was this extraordinary relation between him and Rasta in Jamaica which Rasta here [in Guyana] would hear about-this Black university man that a Black government throw out, this Black university man that goes through the region and is thrown out of this place [and that place]. He captured your imagination. So much so that I remember these huge demonstrations for this man that they didn't

know. It was a response to this person that you knew had to be-there was a word that we used to use in those days-a forwarder. (Small Axe: March 2004)

Kwayana (1988:6) supports Andaiye's observation, by drawing attention to the resonance in Guyana of Rodney's earlier conceptualization of Black Power:

Thus, before he had shifted residence back to Guyana, before he had spoken a single word in his home country, Walter Rodney was a political issue and a threat in the eyes of the regime. He was also a hero among the people as he had been ever since his expulsion from Jamaica for daring to fan the flames of the rebirth of the black and oppressed. For it must be remembered that even when he had merely advanced as far as the black renaissance—Black Power—Rodney defined it to include the masses of oppressed in the West Indies and in particular the (Asian) Indians.

And Roopnarine (1998) attributes Rodney's success to "the power of his own personality and a kind of integrity of personality." According to him:

Some of his activities were so outstanding and extraordinary – the demonstrations, the exemplary nature of his life. I remember during the Arnold Rampersaud trial, this was a trial where the police had arrested a PPP activist from the Correntyne and accused him of murder. They went through one trial then another. They were determined to hang this man and they moved the trial to Georgetown because the state could not get a fair trial in the Correntyne whereas in Georgetown they could get a jury of African Guyanese people. Burnham intended to play the race game and manipulate these people. And I remember Walter Rodney went to the street corners and I remember on that evening at Louisa Row and he was speaking about his sense of incredible shame as he saw his fellow black brothers and sisters coming into the court lying and attempting to hang his Indian brother. And there was something in the quality of that kind of commitment to people regardless of race and class and all of that was rather inspiring.

3 Rodney's Ideas on Resistance and Empowerment

While the ideas developed by Rodney during the Guyana years are part of his larger political praxis, the fact that Guyana was a peculiar society riveted by conflict between two non-white peoples, his emphasis were not the same as when he dealt with the conflict between Africans and Whites. Before arriving in Guyana, from as far back as the Jamaica period, when he

formulated his concept of Caribbean Black Power to include East Indians, he had incorporated class into his thinking. But the Guyana situation allowed him an opportunity to put it into practice. Some scholars saw his Guyana years as a break with his Black Nationalist past. Dupuy (1996:107) contends that, "By 1974, however, Rodney had abandoned the cultural nationalist perspective in favor of a democratic Marxist perspective." He further argues that Rodney may not have been aware of his "inconsistencies between his earlier and later positions on the race question".

What Dupuy calls "abandonment" was in fact a widening of Rodney's praxis to include the objective and subjective conditions in Guyana where the principal conflict was not simply between two races but between the people of all races and an authoritarian regime. Hence Rodney did not abandon Black Nationalism; he did not find it a necessary tool in Guyana. Andaiye (2005) argues that since Rodney was always concerned with concrete issues, his ideas were always evolving. Clive Thomas (2005) supports that contention:

Walter Rodney's published works accept the philosophical and methodological premise of a constantly changing social reality and the need therefore for theory and practice to adjust and refine analysis to accord with the unfolding reality. This does not mean that his theoretical premises are ad hoc, what it means is that they are imbued with enough plasticity to accommodate a changing world around us.

Rodney was not oblivious to race; he felt that it was a mistake to ignore it. He thus saw organization and mobilization at two levels—separately within the various race groups and all the groups acting together. He explains it this way:

One must organize within the African community, within the Indian community, too, to build different forms of consciousness, different types of social bases, which will ultimately be the form of the new State, and, simultaneously one must begin to find effective revolutionary integrative mechanisms, both organizational and ideological, in terms of people, purely and simply, people, you know, as contributors to the new concept of group consciousness, group power, as for example, like putting six persons three Africans, three Indians, not just in terms of a symbolic show (they have, of course, to be ideologically consistent and so on), but putting them in a meaningful, nationally powerful position of leadership, and as a unit.(1970: 385)

Rodney developed a three-pronged political approach to confront the situation in Guyana — self organization of the working people; multi-racial and multi-class unity or a broad anti

dictatorial alliance that cut across race and class; the role of the party as public educator and mobilizer-organizer; and mass non-cooperation, civil disobedience and defiance. Central to Rodney's praxis was the belief that the working people had the capacity and duty to fight and determine their own liberation or what has been referred to as the self-emancipation of the working people. Speaking directly to the situation in Guyana in 1979, he argued for a linkage between resistance and self emancipation:

Neither the WPA nor any other organization needs to produce a master plan for national struggle against the dictator. We can rely on the initiative and good judgment of our people, provided there is a spirit of resistance...Artists have a special responsibility at this time of crisis, the task of defending creatively against the onslaughts of a regime which behaves like the Philistines of old in trampling everything of human value. The people of Latin America have found that pens and guitars and paint brushes all become effective weapons in the struggle against the gorillas. Language, song and drum are also weapons within the Guyanese situation. Cultivate the spirit of resistance! Cultivate the Accabre spirit! (1979:18)

Kwayana (1988: 2) puts Rodney's idea in a broader perspective: "In relation to the fate of the oppressed classes in a given country, he believed that they must discover themselves in order to understand their historic mission in their own oppression. From the outset, Rodney knew that the emancipation of the oppressed could be brought about only by the oppressed themselves." Underlining the importance of self-emancipation to Rodney's praxis, Kwayana (1988:31) further points out that "Walter Rodney's message to the people was the message of self-emancipation. He had no other message. At his death we called him the prophet of self-emancipation. He warned against the would-be deliverer and asked his people to beware of them".

Rodney was adamant that any advance in Guyana had to be premised on unity across racial lines. He argued that although external influence and the machinations of the political parties were responsible for the racial polarization, Guyanese, in the final analysis, must rise above racial division. He further contended that the problems faced by the Guyanese people have very little to do with race and more to do with class. According to him:

No ordinary Afro- Guyanese, no ordinary Indo-Guyanese can afford to be misled by the myth of race. Time and time again it has been our undoing. Does it have anything to do with race that the cost of living far out-strips the increase in wages? Does it have anything to do with race that there are no goods in the shops? Does it have anything to do with race when the original lack of democracy as exemplified in the national elections is reproduced at the level of

local government elections? Does it have anything to do with race when the bauxite workers cannot elect their own union leadership? Does it have anything to do with race when, day after day, whether one is Indian or African, without the appropriate party credentials, one either gets no employment, loses one's employment, or is subject to lack of promotion. It is clear that we must get beyond that red herring and recognize that it is intended to divide, that it is not intended in the interest of the common. African and Indian people in this country (1981:6)

But Rodney was not content with unity in form and rhetoric; he worked for unity in the process of self organization and struggle. In paying tribute to the growing racial unity of the time he observed:

Africans and Indians are standing side by side in a way that has not been true since 1953. Indeed, we now have a degree of racial unity greater than any previous time in our history...The firmest unity is unity in struggle. Guyanese are no longer divided in their struggle for bread and justice. Indian sugar workers and African bauxite workers are making common cause. African lawyers and Indian lawyers both see the need for unity to restore the rule of law. Our racial minorities are joining the new national movement without fear of domination. (1976:19).

Rodney was equally firm on the question of unity across class which he saw as important as racial unity. He argued that the broadest possible unity was a necessity. In relation to the inherent class differences he reasoned that "Before the dictatorship can be overthrown, we must solve the difficult problem of creating national unity in the face of class differences. So long as there are classes, there must be some degree of class conflict. Nevertheless, it is necessary to build a broad unity across existing class lines" (1976:19). In terms of ideological prerequisites, Rodney contended that there should be no litmus test:

Our objective is to mobilize an overwhelming gathering of democratic forces across the spectrum of ideological view-points, and by so doing to leave the government isolated in a handful of men. This is the most sensible approach we can try in the short run... The Working People's Alliance thinks it should involve not only the organized political parties but organizations from left of centre, center and right of centre. (Jamaica Gleaner: November 18, 1979).

The role of public scholarship and the party

There is, both from a theoretical point of view as well as from the point of view of anyone engaged in practical politics, a clear distinction between spontaneity in

protest and the organization of that spontaneity and the self-organization of peoples so that they carry themselves from one stage to a higher stage. We feel that we've had a lot of spontaneity in the past, and there is a lot of frustration there, a lot of grievances that are expressed in a very quiet fashion. Our task as a political party is to get people organized and mobilized so that they can take action of various types to remedy the situation. (Jamaica Gleaner: November 18, 1979).

The third aspect of Rodney's praxis was the development of a spirit and culture of defiance. Rodney sought to encourage and celebrate that defiance at the mass level; he saw it as a potent force in the struggle to dismantle the dictatorship. Speaking about a 1979 strike in the bauxite industry he observed "The recent bauxite strike is a high point in the history of the Guyanese working class. For six weeks, bauxite workers stood firm to force management to implement wage increments which had already been part of their collective labor agreement." (1979:15). Rodney was not unaware of the role of fear in holding back the people. But he used history to appeal to what he referred to as the capacity of the human spirit to confront oppression:

Few individuals want to willingly invite their own death. Yet many will be found who are prepared to fight fearlessly for their rights even if their lives are threatened. The human spirit has a remarkable capacity to rise above oppression; and only the fools who now misrule Guyana can imagine that our population alone lacks such capacity. During the famous 1763 slave rebellion in Berbice, there were numerous examples of the undying courage of our fore-parents. (1979:17)

As part of mass defiance, Rodney encouraged civil disobedience and non-cooperation with the government. He argued that since the dictatorship needed the cooperation of the workers to create the wealth to "to buy guns to keep down the very workers," the workers had a duty not to cooperate with the government or what he called "a readiness to disobey the government." He argued that in so doing the people would not be acting unlawfully as the government itself was disobeying the laws. Stressing that Civil Disobedience is most successful when it includes large numbers of people he contended that:

Non-cooperation means simply that citizens will refuse to cooperate in their own oppression and in the oppression of others. It may be hidden or open, individual or collective. The instances are increasing of individual Guyanese resisting or ignoring the notorious "instructions" given by the dictator. Each publicized example of personal resistance helps lift the spirits of the entire population. Other individuals are going about their personal rebellion in a quiet manner. However, non-cooperation will be most effective where it is based on collective or group action (1979:16).

4 Rodney's Practice: Organizing and Mobilizing

From 1974 to the beginning of 1979 the WPA engaged in grassroots activities, mainly in the form of community meetings, particularly in the urban communities of Georgetown and the bauxite town, Linden. It placed much emphasis on public education by putting out regular press releases and handbills that commented on the issues of the day such as government corruption, political repression and economic mismanagement. Rodney (1976:120) explained the factors that brought the groups in the WPA together:

These groups came together in response to at least two important pressures. One was a new demand to overcome a racist-oriented politics, to break with the divisiveness of race as a fact of organization, so that both ASCRIA and IPRA collaborated on issues such as the landless squatters, of both Indian and African descent. The question was dealt with in class terms rather than racial terms. Second, as questions of socialism and ideology were being raised, the aim was to provide an organization, which would take the task of political and ideological education more seriously than any other existing political group.

The WPA's birth broke new ground in Guyanese post-colonial politics. First, it was the first time since the split of the original PPP in 1955 that a political group had declared as its major objective the unity of the various race groups, thus challenging one of the main planks of the PNC's survival mechanism. Roopnarine (1998) observes:

On the internal front, Burnham said to the Africans, "you know, the alternative to me is these Indian people who are going to create an avalanche and swamp all of us. So I am really your only hope." He said this to the military, he said this to the police force, to the civil service, to the trade union movement. As a result, he had his bases covered. So the PPP was effectually neutralized. It is not that it did not raise up the cry for free and fair elections, they did. They mounted what protest they could have mounted but it remained very ineffective because first of all they had no particular presence in the capital city and that is where the seat of government was. But even if the PPP organized the protest in the rural areas - the farmers - this made no particular impact on the political situation and Burnham could shrug it off. I recall that in 1973 when Dr. Jagan complained about rigging he told him "well, you have neither the capacity nor the will to do anything about it. March if you will."

Second, although it declared itself Marxist, the WPA eschewed any affiliation with the Moscow-oriented communist parties. In this regard the charge of communism that was leveled

at the PPP with good effect could not be leveled in the same way at the WPA. Roopnarine explains "Burnham had really mastered the art of dealing with the internal opposition and he did this in a very clever way. On the one hand he said to the United States 'the alternative to me is Moscow; these people are communists, what are you really doing.' So he played off the United States and as a result he was able to win their support on the external front against the PPP. The emergence of the WPA also had direct implications for the PNC influence in the African-Guyanese community. Rodney, Kwayana, and Thomas were well-known African leaders whose political and moral standing in that community was significant. Crucially, unlike ASCRIA, which never openly rivaled the PNC politically, the WPA made clear that it was a political group opposed to the PNC and dedicated to combating it in the political arena.

The party's official organ, *Dayclean*, a weekly newsheet with an initial circulation of 5,000, became a thorn in the government's side as it dared to discuss issues that other opposition publications avoided. It was not surprising, then, that the first issue was seized by the customs in November 1974 on its arrival from Trinidad where it was printed as a gift from the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC), Trinidad's leading Black Power organization. When the WPA continued to publish the newsheet, two of its leading members, Moses Bhagwan and Eusi Kwayana, were charged with illegally publishing a newspaper. Bhagwan was eventually convicted on in 1976 and spent 19 days in prison while the case against Kwayana was not pursued by the government. Kwayana had earlier spent one week in jail as a remand prisoner.

The party also participated in several popular uprisings and protests. These included a 1976 strike in the bauxite industry called by the Organization of Working People (OWP), a rebel worker group with close ties to the WPA; a 1977 sugar strike called by the PPP-affiliated GAWU union that lasted for 135 days; a revolt by a group of teachers against the government and their union; a campaign to free Arnold Rampersaud, a PPP activist charged with the murder of a soldier; and the boycott of a referendum held by the government to write a new constitution. The party was also instrumental in the formation of the Council for National Safety, a group of opposition parties and civic organizations that came together to press for an inquiry into the 1978 mass suicide-murder at Jonestown, a commune run by a US preacher, Jim Jones.

5 The 1976 Bauxite Strike and the Evolution of the Four Unions Bloc

The WPA upon its formation had continued the relationship with the bauxite workers at Linden that was started by ASCRIA. A rebel workers' group numbering about 35 workers took organizational form with the formation of the Organization of the Working People (OWP) in August 1974. The OWP's major objectives were the improvement of the working conditions in the industry, and the democratization of the union as a means of making it responsive to the

needs and interests of the workers rather than the government. Pursuit of these objectives inevitably brought the OWP into conflict with the PNC, which was bent on maintaining political control of Linden (Quamina 1987). As part of its objective, the OWP invited WPA leaders — Walter Rodney, Clive Thomas, and Eusi Kwayana— to hold classes with the workers in labor economics, political economy, and revolution (Kwayana 1988). As a result, most OWP members joined the WPA. This development obviously did not sit well with the government which accused the OWP of being a political front of the WPA (Kwayana 1988; Spinner 1984).

It was against this background that the PNC responded violently to a strike called by the OWP at Wismar on December 9-22, 1976. The strike was called to protest a labor agreement signed by the union that gave the workers a six percent raise in wages. Most workers felt that the raise was inadequate and took offence to the union executive signing an agreement on their behalf without their consent (Quamina 1987; Kwayana 1988). When the workers took to the streets in picketing exercises, they were set upon by the police and 42 workers were arrested and later teargassed in their cells. This action by the government brought “dozens of women unto the streets” in support of the mainly male workers. According to Kwayana (1988:11), this confrontation “essentially marked the fall of the PNC” in the bauxite community. Another important development was the fact that the bauxite workers got solidarity from the sugar workers through their union Guyana Agricultural Workers’ Union (GAWU) which called two one-day solidarity strikes on December 12 and 19 (Quamina 1987:85). These actions, which was supported by nearly 95 percent GAWU’s membership, represented the first time in post colonial Guyana that the mainly Indian sugar workers gave active support to their African counterparts (Kwayana 1988).

Shortly after the bauxite strike, a rebel grouping began to develop within the Trade Union Congress (TUC), the umbrella trade union organization. This group, comprising GAWU, the National Association of Agricultural, Commercial, and Industrial Employees (NAACIE), the University of Guyana Staff Association (UGSA) and the Clerical and Commercial Workers Union (CCWU), refused to follow the government’s line, opting instead for an independent position which put the workers’ interest first (Spinner 1984). This group was in effect an opposition bloc. GAWU, which eventually gained recognition in 1976, was the trade union arm of the PPP. The UGSA, though not an arm of the WPA, was led by Clive Thomas and other leading WPA members, while NAACIE’s leadership was identified with both the WPA and PPP. In fact, one WPA leader, Eusi Kwayana, served as political and education advisor to NAACIE. The CCWU was the only member of the group with no overt partisan political ties. Up to the mid-1970s, it was affiliated to the PNC, but moved away from the party’s orbit as the government became more authoritarian (Spinner 1984).

This Four Union group, though functioning as an ad hoc group, was a crucial addition to the growing protest movement as it represented workers in the strategic sectors of the economy.

Further, it was a multiracial group with GAWU and NAACIE representing the mainly Indian sugar workers, and CCWU representing the mainly African urban workers in the commercial sector. UGSA's membership was multiracial. With these unions joining the WPA, the PPP and the OWP the protest movement now had a broader base. In addition to political protest, there was now the industrial option which was important since the government by the mid- 1970s controlled almost 80 percent of the workforce.

6 The 135-day Sugar Strike

In keeping with its policy of critical support, the PPP in 1976 supported the nationalization of the sugar industry and the remainder of the bauxite industry, and it also endorsed the government's taking over of private schools. Dr. Jagan and Mr. Burnham appeared on the same platform at the 1976 TUC May Day rally at which Dr. Jagan committed himself to unity with the PNC (Caribbean Contact: May 1977). Unity talks between the two parties were announced in July 1976, but before they got going, the PNC withdrew citing an editorial in the PPP's Mirror newspaper that chided the PNC for removing subsidies on basic food items and for increased military spending (Gopaul: 1997:189). Although Dr. Jagan remained convinced that cooperation between the two parties was the only way forward for Guyana, the PPP in May 1977 abandoned "critical support" citing the violent response to the bauxite strike and continued harassment of PPP supporters as evidence of the PNC's lack of interest in unity (Caribbean Contact: June 1977.)

So it was not surprising when on August 25, 1977 GAWU called its members out on strike to support the demand for profit sharing revenues that were promised to them more than two years before. The strike, which lasted for 135 days, was well supported by the workers. It is estimated that for most of the strike 90 percent of the workforce stayed away from work. (*Mirror*: January 20, 1978).

So successful was the strike that the government responded harshly. It moved military and police forces into the sugar belt. As the strike progressed, the PNC declared it political and recruited government supporters and workers, military personnel, and mainly African unemployed youth and women as scabs. This strike-breaking tactic coupled with the arrest and prosecution of several union organizers succeeded in converting the strike into a racial confrontation between the mainly Indian sugar workers and the African community. Africans were told by the government that the sugar workers' demands were unreasonable. According to Kwayana (1988:10),

The immediate response of the PNC was to take command of the airwaves and agitate against the PPP on an openly racist basis, telling the public that the PPP wanted all the money for the sugar workers and asking them what would be left for the rest of the nation.

Racial confrontation was averted when the WPA along with the other members of the Four Union grouping, the OWP, and a group of Catholic Church members led by Jesuit priest, Father Malcolm Rodrigues, constituted themselves into an ad hoc support group that gave moral and material support to the striking workers. The WPA organized public meetings in the African communities adjoining the sugar estates and distributed an estimated 30,000 handbills aimed at educating the public of the industrial nature of the strike (Kwayana 1988). The Four Unions, the OWP and the "Friends of the Sugar Workers" headed by Fr. Malcolm Rodrigues, all raised strike relief of mainly foodstuff for the workers. The Four Unions also sponsored a resolution at the annual TUC meeting of September 28-30 condemning the government's strikebreaking tactics. (Catholic Standard: October 2, 1977). The Caribbean Conference of Churches at its annual meeting held in Guyana November 14-17 also expressed support for the workers' cause and called on the government to respect the workers' right to strike (Caribbean Contact December 1977).

The PNC countered by banning meetings organized by GAWU, PPP, and the WPA and threatening to impose a curfew and detain protesters under the National Security Act. It also used the state media to attack those African leaders who supported the strike, in particular the African leaders of the WPA (Kwayana 1988). Kwayana, in particular, was criticized for joining with the Indians against Africans. (Dayclean December 1977). The police also seized two truckloads of foodstuff on December 8, 1978 donated by groups supportive of the strikers (Kwayana 1988; Caribbean Contact February, 1978). An estimated 6,000 scabs were recruited and used to break the strike. These were supported by public servants, prisoners and military personnel who were ordered by the government to spend part of the work day and weekends harvesting cane. An estimated 100 GAWU activists were arrested and charged with intimidating strikebreakers (Gopaul 1997: 192-193).

7 The Arnold Rampersaud and Correntyne Teachers' Protests

Even as the bauxite and sugar strikes raged, there were two instances of protest that served to strengthen and broaden the protest movement. Although these were PPP led protests, in both instances, the solidarity of Walter Rodney and the WPA was pivotal in transforming the PPP actions into broader national protests. The first protest resulted from the fatal shooting on July 18, 1974 of a black soldier at the toll station at Number 74 village on the Correntyne. Twenty-five PPP activists in the area were detained and questioned in the following two weeks. Eventually, one activist, Arnold Rampersaud, was charged with the murder of the policeman. After two trials held in November 1976 and March-April 1977 ended in divided juries, he was finally acquitted in the third trial held in November 1977 (Nagamootoo 1977:20).

But in the process the case evolved into a political contest between the PNC and the opposition. The Arnold Rampersaud case had taken on political and racial tones primarily

because the accused was a PPP organizer, because he was East Indian and the victim was African. The state successfully applied for the case to be removed from the predominantly Indian Berbice county to the predominantly African Georgetown. It was argued that the state could not guarantee a fair trial in a predominantly Indian and PPP area as the jurors would be drawn from a community that was hostile to the government (Nagamotoo 1977).

To counter this move, the PPP set up the Arnold Rampersaud Defense Committee in December 1975 that included leading WPA and PPP members. The committee's task was to publicize the trial both inside and outside of Guyana and to raise international support from human rights groups. The presence of Walter Rodney and Eusi Kwayana on the committee caused much concern to the government since these two leaders were known and respected in the African community for their contributions to the struggle for African dignity and liberation. The PNC opined that these two leaders were intent on "selling out" the Africans and were more concerned with justice for Indians rather than that for a slain African (Kwayana 1988).

In the course of campaigning for Rampersaud's freedom Rodney articulated his position on race relations and racial unity. The trial in his estimation was a manifestation of the deep-seated racial hostility in the country which according to him was the doing of both sides of the racial divide. He located the trial within the context of the larger struggle for political and economic freedom. According to him:

The trial of Arnold Rampersaud on the charge of alleged murder is a serious affair. It is serious because murder is always serious. It is serious because it is the murder of a policeman. It is serious because of the political implications. It is serious because racial and racist implications are involved. It is serious because the news coverage of this item has not been, and can never be, under the circumstances sufficient to inform the general public so that they can understand what is going on. It is serious because it is taking place at a time of deepening economic crisis. And you must rest assured that this economic crisis is fundamentally related to the absence of rights, to the various aspects of the denial of justice and fairplay in this society (1981:1)

He was particularly concerned at the manner in which African Guyanese jurors and the African Guyanese community in general were being coerced into ensuring that Rampersaud was found guilty despite evidence to the contrary. For him this was an insult to the dignity of Africans. He appealed to the African Guyanese historical legacy of freedom and justice and challenged them not to tarnish it. Speaking as an African he asserted:

Now I am an Afro-Guyanese. There are very many things about that against which I rebel. I'm not rebelling just as an abstract citizen; I'm rebelling as a

Guyanese with this particular heritage, as an Afro-Guyanese. First of all, to tell you the truth, sitting in that court-room, which I've attempted to do on as many days as possible, I have felt sick when I've seen one black man after another come to that witness box, lying his head off, being shown to be lying. Why? Because these are ordinary working class black people, even the policemen; in a certain category they are workers, they work for wages; they are associated with the state, but more often than not, because they can't help it. Now it is sickening, it is insulting to be sitting down and seeing ordinary working class or peasant black people being reduced to the level of being made toys and puppets of people who do not have their interests at heart. - Whatever else we may have been in our history in this country, we have been a people with dignity. We came out of slavery with dignity and that was a tremendous achievement, because slavery is inherently degrading. But our people came out of slavery and we could stand tall. We fought after slavery to build the villages in this country. We fought to open up the interior of this country. Our people, I'm speaking now specifically of the black Guyanese, whatever may be our shortcomings, have managed to persist in this country with this basis of dignity (1981:5)

Kwayana (1988: 9) argued that although international solidarity was important to the freeing of Rampersaud, it was the "social protest" that was decisive in influencing the jury that was predominantly black. Crucial to this social protest was the work of the Defense Committee that took the case to the streets. Over 60 public meetings were held across the country between November 1976 and Rampersaud's release in November 1977. Rodney was the main speaker at most of these meetings at which the attendance ranged from 100 to 5,000. Many of these meetings were accompanied by picketing exercises and distribution of handbills. Of particular significance was a march by 25 African bauxite workers attached to the OWP from the bauxite town to Georgetown on November 20, 1977. During the trials, an estimated 3,000 protestors, mostly PPP supporters, flocked to the environs of the courts in solidarity (Nagamootoo 1977).

The significance of the Arnold Rampersaud episode was the contribution it made towards breaking down the racial walls that worked against a racially united protest movement. It also demonstrated that the WPA through its multiracial thrust was evolving as the bridge between the two races. The close of alliance between the PPP and WPA also served to bring the workers of both races out in active protest.

Shortly after the Rampersaud episode came to a close, a group of approximately 60 teachers on the Correntyne coast mounted a protest to draw attention to the condition of teachers in the country. The main focus of the teachers' protest was against the co-opting of their union, the Guyana Teacher's Association (GTA) by the PNC. Beginning on February 18, 1978, these

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protests took the form of “go slows” and withdrawal of labor once per week. To diffuse the teachers’ militancy, the Ministry of Education transferred ten teachers it deemed to be the leaders. The group of teachers, who were mostly East Indian, responded by calling a strike on March 10, 1978, which did not get support from their union. The group subsequently seceded from the union and formed the Democratic Teachers Movement (DTM) which supervised the strike that lasted for six weeks and which got the support of an estimated 90% of the 200 teachers in the area. Walter Rodney was invited by the teachers to address them and his presence helped to transform the teachers protest into a mass-protest. According to Kwayana (1988:13) when Rodney turned up to speak at rallies “whole villages just surged into the streets.” Although the teachers’ protest did not achieve much in terms of meeting its goal of wresting the union from PNC control, like the Rampersaud episode, it contributed to the racial solidarity that was developing within the opposition.