

# H-Diplo

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**Robert Waters and Gordon Daniels. "Striking for freedom? International Intervention and the Guianese sugar workers' strike of 1964." *Cold War History* 10:4 (November 2010): 537-569. DOI: 10.1080/14682741003603102. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682741003603102>**

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Review by **Cary Fraser**, Pennsylvania State University

**T**his article seeks to encourage a rethinking of the role of the United States in promoting the violence that eventually led to the ouster in 1964 of the People Progressive Party's government (PPP), led by Cheddi Jagan, in British Guiana. The focus of the essay is an exploration of the "violent pro-government sugar workers' strike of 1964 and in particular the role of Jagan's wife, Janet, presenting evidence from retired Cuban intelligence agents that Cuba countered US aid to the opposition by providing paramilitary training to Guianese cadres and laundering financial aid to Jagan's government. This outside intervention turned British Guiana into a Cold War sideshow." (p. 537)

The American effort to forestall independence for Britain's colony in South America under the leadership of Cheddi Jagan has received considerable attention in recent years. The partial declassification of American and British official records has helped scholars to demonstrate the extent to which American policy was implemented both through covert intervention in the colony and through direct pressures from the White House and the State Department upon British governments - both Conservative and Labour. This essay brings Cuban sources into the discussion about this period and the Cuban sources have offered some perspectives on the ways in which the ouster of Jagan reflected the interplay of the domestic politics of the colony with the Cold War calculus that became entrenched in the Caribbean as a result of the Cuban revolution and the Soviet decision to undermine the Monroe Doctrine through its military, economic, and diplomatic support for Fidel Castro and his colleagues. The essay makes it evident that Cuban intelligence was involved in supporting the PPP in 1964 and that Cuba was prepared to provide assistance that would allow the Jagan government to withstand the increasing Anglo-American pressure designed to cripple the People's Progressive Party as the colony prepared for the

general elections in December 1964. This Cuban support followed upon assistance that apparently came from the Soviet Union in the two preceding years. (pp. 549-551)

The essay provides interesting new details on the story of a Cold War conflict in British Guiana between 1962 and 1964 but its capacity to redefine the contours of that story is much less significant than is claimed by the authors. The records of the major political parties in British Guiana during this period have not been released into the public domain and many of the Guyanese principals in the events have been very guarded in their disclosures about their roles in the violent trauma of that period. The majority of the leaders are deceased and the status of their surviving records, if any, is not clear. Further, the records of the covert operations, from both the British and American sides, have not been fully declassified and until they are made available it will be difficult to write an authoritative account of the entire episode. The uncertainties that surround the episode are evidenced when the authors speculate that: "If the Guyanese, Cuban, or Russian governments finally release documents dealing with the intervention, it would be no surprise if they reveal that Cheddi had been secretly bypassed by his wife, the general secretary." (p. 558). This speculation is then followed by the recommendation that the various sources should release their documentary treasures as "Until they do, we will never truly know what happened during the 161 days of Guyanese violence in 1964." (p. 558) As a result, the claim by the authors that the essay is a "revisionist account of Guyanese labour and political history" has to be viewed with a measure of caution. (p. 538)

Beyond the problems posed by the relative paucity of the archival record, the essay is less than authoritative in its analysis of the politics in the colony. One concern is that the authors' focus upon the 1964 strike distracts from an understanding of the influence of the period of inter-communal violence starting in 1962 which both preceded, and served as a catalyst for, the strike and attendant violence in 1964. (p. 538) It is an unfortunate lapse as this effort to separate out the strike from the events of the preceding years seems designed to set the stage for the assertion by the authors that: "As to the question of AFL-CIO complicity in CIA actions and culpability for the ensuing violence, we argue that the connection was smaller than the scholarly consensus contends and must be put into Cold War context." (p. 539) The CIA's relationship with the AFL-CIO in this episode remains murky because of the failure to declassify the relevant documents more than four decades later. The authors would have been better served by being somewhat reserved in their effort to question the extent of CIA-AFL-CIO collaboration in British Guiana. As early as 1967, the New York times had reported that the CIA had been involved in supporting strikes in British Guiana in 1962 and 1963, and the role of Serafino Romualdi and the American Institute for Free Labor Development in supporting the anti-Jagan forces will need to be much more systematically examined when the still classified records become available. Thus, the relationship between the strike in the sugar industry of 1964 to previous episodes of violent unrest seems difficult to justify.

Second, the authors make the assertion that “The story of the US government and British Guiana was obscured until 1996 ...” – a rather strange assertion since the story was not obscure in British Guiana, the wider Caribbean and Latin America, or in Great Britain and Canada. Between 1968 and 1992, it was well understood in these countries that the PPP had been excluded from power by successive American governments. Jagan’s return to power in 1992 was overseen by the former American President, Jimmy Carter, who led a team of observers to monitor the elections in Guyana and to ensure a peaceful transfer of power. Carter’s appearance in 1992 begs the question whether every election between 1964 and 1992 in Guyana was rigged in favor of the People’s National Congress - either with tacit support or active collaboration from the United States.

Third, in the authors’ discussion of Cuban assistance to the PPP is the statement that “Castro ordered that Cheddi Jagan was not to know the source of the money.” (p. 551) Later, the authors indicate that “strong evidence suggests that he opposed the violence that surrounded him” and that the Cuban operative, Osvaldo Cárdenas, expressed the view that “Jagan so vehemently opposed violence that his colleagues derisively called him ‘Gandhi’.” (p. 557) Jagan’s opposition to violence in 1964 has to be seen in the context of his experience in 1962 when the opposition groups initiated a protest campaign against PPP budget proposals that sparked violence in Georgetown. The demonstrations revealed Jagan’s vulnerability to opposition pressures in the capital where he had very little support. Ultimately, he was forced to depend upon the Governor’s intervention and the use of British troops to save his government. It is doubtful that he would have been willing to face a similar situation some two years later with new elections scheduled.

Thus, was the Cuban assistance being sent to support the PPP’s use of violence in 1964 as the authors imply? It is not clear from the evidence that the authors proffer that the Cubans were preparing to launch a violent campaign in support of the PPP. Much more plausible is the authors’ suggestion that Jagan may have temporarily lost control over the PPP and more militant activists were prepared to engage in a campaign of violence against their opponents. According to the essay, in May 1964 the Opposition leader Forbes Burnham sought weapons from the U.S. Consul General to counter what he perceived to be a threat that “the PPP might retaliate by slaughtering Burnham and his supporters” in the event that the PPP lost the election. If Burnham’s fears about the PPP and its arms supplies were real, why would he be concerned about possible hostile action after the election? Burnham was subsequently reassured by the Consul General on instructions from the State Department that the U.S. “would not allow Jagan to keep power through violent means...”. (p. 552) Weeks later, after the death of a senior civil servant, Arthur Abraham, and seven of his children in a suspicious fire at his home, the Governor assumed emergency powers and arrested a large number of PPP activists, including the Deputy Premier, Brindley Benn. However, the inter-communal violence continued and there was a bombing at the PPP’s headquarters and the offices of the PPP’s trading arm, the Guyana Import-Export Company (GIMPEX). One of the questions that will have to be explored in greater depth when other records become available is whether

all of the political parties had lost control over violent elements among their members as the level of racial polarization increased in the months preceding the elections.

This lack of clarity about the recourse to inter-communal violence by various elements or groups in 1964 and Jagan's opposition to violence in the PPP suggest that fundamental questions about the motivations and goals of Cuban financial support need to be explored. While the authors focus upon the assumption that the Cubans were involved in training 50 PPP activists in "guerrilla tactics" (according to the CIA), the creation of GIMPEX is not examined in great detail. It would have been useful for the authors to explore whether the Cuban support was directed less at the strike in the sugar industry and more at ensuring that the PPP would have a long-term source of income through its trading arm should it be ousted. Is it possible that Cuban support was directed at creating an economic lifeline for the party leadership after they lost control of government? In fact, was Cuban support directed at ensuring that the PPP would survive as a political force in the future?

In that context, it may be possible to argue that the 1964 strike was a desperate effort to settle the issue of recognition for the PPP-backed Guyana Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU) as the sole bargaining agent for sugar workers as part of a wider strategy to ensure that the PPP would have the resources to return to power after political independence. In the charged atmosphere of the colony in 1964, the strike in the sugar industry may have been a catalyst for the explosion of violence that occurred. In effect, the PPP seems to have been engaged in a desperate struggle to oust its rival in the sugar industry - the Man Power Citizens Association - after its previous failure to do so in 1953. Its efforts in 1953 had resulted in its removal from government by British troops. Despite the strike in 1964, the PPP again failed to secure the dominance it sought within the sugar industry by way of recognition of its affiliate, GAWU. Later that year, the PPP was ousted by an election held under a system of proportional representation and it would have to wait for more than a decade before it ultimately secured the recognition of GAWU as the bargaining agent for sugar workers after it agreed to a program of "critical support" for the Burnham-led PNC regime in the mid-1970s.

The Cold War episode in British Guiana remains a puzzle for scholars because the records of so many parties to the episode are still closed and/or unavailable. Just as important, it became evident that the Jagans and the PPP lacked the political legitimacy to govern a deeply-fractured society - a problem they encountered in 1953 and again between 1962 and 1964. While Robert Waters and Gordon Daniels have added some interesting details about the period, the complexities of the issues and the motivations of the parties involved still leave an entire range of questions unanswered.

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