The 1935 Labor Rebellions and the Politics of African-Indian Solidarity in British Guiana

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THE 1935 LABOR REBELLIONS AND
THE POLITICS OF AFRICAN-INDIAN SOLIDARITY IN BRITISH GUIANA

by

NICOLE A. BURROWES

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

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NICOLE A. BURROWES

Advisor: Professor Herman L. Bennett

Beginning in 1935, African and Indian youth, women and men who comprised the sugar plantation labor force in British Guiana, launched a series of strikes that sent shock waves across the British Empire. Joining the spirit of rebellion that engulfed the Caribbean throughout the 1930s, their actions caused massive political, social and economic unrest. British officials worked to understand what triggered the unrest and to preserve their political interests. Administrators in India wrote to the Colonial Office with concern about their compatriots across the Atlantic. At the local level, workers likened their cause to that of Ethiopia as it sought to rally the world in its defense against Mussolini’s invasion. My dissertation is the first full-length study of these labor rebellions by Indian and African plantation workers and, more broadly, of the 1930s, a period which remains understudied in British Guiana’s historiography. This is a story about the development of modern politics, overlapping diasporas, the seeds of solidarity and historical possibility.

Based on extensive archival research in the United Kingdom, Guyana and the United States, “The 1935 Labor Rebellions” positions plantation workers as central actors in the
evolution of modern politics in British Guiana decades before independence. Although predominantly linked to the history of enslavement, indenture and economic underdevelopment, the plantation was also the site of modern political action, coalition building and resistance. I challenge the dominant focus on racial conflict in the historiography of British Guiana by asking how cross-racial solidarity was enacted, and by interpreting its legacy for Guyanese realities today. Divided by colonial racism and subject to the needs of capital, plantation workers experienced a shared sense of suffering and subordination, although their circumstances and positionality differed. Their alliance neither implied nor provoked an eradication of racialized identities. Rather, I argue that workers employed these identities as a basis for concerted action, as well as a means of envisioning expanded anti-colonial international connections. Far from a triumphalist narrative, my project attempts to historicize frames of reference, identities and aspirations that emerged during the struggle of the 1930s that both constrain current thinking and highlight the unfulfilled visions of working people in Guyana.
DEDICATION

This spirit of this project is dedicated Esther Burrowes, Ernest Burrowes and Ada Weithers, who always pushed me to put God first, to love deeply, to think for myself, and to make a contribution—what I hope this dissertation will eventually become in the world. I dedicate that to you.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................1

- PROJECT DESCRIPTION ..................................................................................................................3
- ON THE NATURE OF THE CARIBBEAN: THEORIZING PLANTATION SOCIETIES ............................................7
- RELEVANT LITERATURE ...................................................................................................................17
- CHAPTER OUTLINE ..........................................................................................................................27
- RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE ................................................................................................................29

CHAPTER 1 – SEEDS OF DIVISION ....................................................................................................33

- INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................................33
- INDIGENOUS ERASURE, SYSTEMS OF SLAVERY, AND INDENTURED SERVITUDE .....................................34
- THE DEVELOPMENT OF RACIALIZED IDENTITIES .............................................................................40
- “THERE IS NOTHING THAT A GUIANESE HAS TO LEARN FROM AN ENGLISHMAN IN POLITICS”: THE
  STRUGGLE OVER THE 1928 CONSTITUTION ....................................................................................43

CHAPTER 2 – OVERLAPPING DIASPORAS IN THE 1930S ................................................................51

- KING SUGAR ....................................................................................................................................51
- ON THE EDGE OF EMPIRE: EXPERIENCING THE SUGAR PLANTATIONS IN BRITISH GUIANA ................54
- TESTIMONY FROM THE GRASSROOTS ..............................................................................................66
- “HAND IN HAND”: CONNECTIONS TO INDIA ...................................................................................72
- DAUGHTERS OF AFRICA, SONS OF ETHIOPIA ...................................................................................78
- CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................................85

CHAPTER 3 – “SLAVERY DONE LONG TIME”: THE LABOR REBELLIONS OF 1935 ........88

- INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................................88
- OVERVIEW .........................................................................................................................................91
WAVING RED FLAGS: JOHANNA HARRIS, HUBERT CRITCHLOW, AND THE BGLU ................................................. 93


RACE, CAPITAL, AND LABOR: THE STRIKES AT LE RESOUVENIR ESTATES ........................................... 105

LUSIGNAN ESTATES: BRINGING THE AYSSINIAN WAR HOME ................................................................. 112

“SLAVERY DONE LONG TIME”: THE POWER OF MYRIAD VOICES AT PLANTATION FARM ............. 116

CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................................................... 121

CHAPTER 4 – “I THOUGHT THE PEOPLE HAD GONE CRAZY”: CIRCUITS OF IMPERIAL ANXIETY .................................................................................................................................................. 124

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................................. 124

INITIAL (MIS)INTERPRETATIONS? ................................................................................................................. 125

GOVERNOR NORTHCOTE ISSUES A PROCLAMATION .................................................................................. 130

POLICING THE MIND: BANNING “SUBVERSIVE” PUBLICATIONS ................................................................ 134

THE DAILY ARGOSY SPEAKS OUT .................................................................................................................. 140

CRITCHLOW CALLS FOR A COMMISSION TO INVESTIGATE ...................................................................... 147

COMMISSION POLITICS .................................................................................................................................. 149

THE UNTHINKABLE STRIKE .............................................................................................................................. 154

THE GOVERNOR & POLICE INSPECTOR WEIGH IN ..................................................................................... 160


INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................................. 168

THE COMMISSION REPORTS BACK .................................................................................................................. 168

INDIA’S RESPONSE .......................................................................................................................................... 183

RESULTS OF THE 1935 LABOR REBELLIONS .............................................................................................. 188

LOSSES ............................................................................................................................................................... 192

CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................................................... 194

xii
LIST OF TABLES

Table
1  British Guiana Population Percentages by Race, 1931……………………………………39
2  List of Plantation Jobs………………………………………………………………………………58
3  Categories of Workers………………………………………………………………………………98
4  Sample Work Shifts on Sugar Estates……………………………………………………………172

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure
1  Map of Proclaimed Areas, October 18, 1935…………………………………………………131
2  *Daily Argosy* Political Cartoon, “Sugar Estate Labour Disturbances”…………………140
3  1931 Map of British Guiana. ………………………………………………………………………198
Introduction¹

On November 10, 2014, the president of Guyana suspended Parliament. Recognizing that the opposition was organizing a no-confidence vote on his presidency, Donald Ramotar moved quickly, arguing that his action was not only constitutional, but that it would give “democracy a better opportunity to breathe.”² In response, Guyanese people mobilized in the streets and vented online. An online petition demanded that the president “re-convene Parliament immediately and return to the path of democracy.”³ Journalists speculated about the meaning of this turn of events.

A Jamaica Observer editorial headline predicted, “Guyana Headed for Dictatorship,” and the author observed,

The history of Guyana shows a consistent unwillingness to accept the will of the people as expressed in free and fair elections. The root cause of the undemocratic tendency is the unabated tension between the two ethnic groups, the Afro-Guyanese and the Indo-Guyanese. This persistent, pandemic and virulent racism has become even more perverted and vicious because both tribes see control of the state as a means of distributing scarce benefits in a very poor country.⁴

¹ In 1931, the population in British Guiana was overwhelmingly “East Indian,” “Black,” and “Mixed,” representing 41.9%, 39.9%, and 10.8% respectively. The “Portuguese,” who were listed separately from “Europeans,” represented 2.77%. “Amerindians” were listed at 2.68%, a low-ball count because census-takers explicitly stated that they did not count indigenous populations in the interior, where the majority were living. “Chinese” and “Europeans” were listed at less than 1% of the population, at 0.95% and 0.69% respectively. Finally, 88.3% of the overall population was Guianese-born. Source: Government of British Guiana, Report on the Results of the Census of the Population, 1931 (Georgetown: "The Argosy" company, 1932). See page iv (table under note 8); page xvl (table listed under note 80); p. xxxiii (table listed under note 185). The terms African, Black, Negro, African descended, coulored race, and Afro-Guianese all appear in the 1930s archival records to refer to Guianese residents of African descent. I also use African-Guianese at times. The terms Indian, East Indian, and Indo-Guianese are the leading terms that appear in the records to refer to Guianese residents of Indian descent. I also use Indian-Guianese at times. British Guiana is the colonial name of the country, renamed Guyana after independence in 1966.


But a different story was brewing. On January 17, 2015, a *New York Times* headline declared, “A Multiethnic Movement Emerges in Guyana to Counter Politics as Usual.” Writing about the protests, Girish Gupta noted, “a few years ago, a gathering of members of Guyana’s two main ethnic groups, which have long been at opposite ends of the country’s political divide, would have been unusual.” Gupta quoted a beauty shop owner in Guyana, Marcia de Costa, who, referring to the diversity of the rally, stated, “this is new for us.”

Although many would share her sentiment, a joint protest that drew together descendants of Africans and Indians was actually not new. There is precedent for this type of action, but the idea of “unabated tension” is a familiar trope in the historiography of Guyana and the popular imagination. It is also a specter that haunts everyday life in the country.

Rewind to the eve of the elections that brought Ramotar to power. On September 4, 2010, approximately 75 people gathered in Brooklyn, New York under the auspices of the Georgetown Progressive Caucus to discuss the future of Guyana in anticipation of the 2011 elections. During the discussion, a long-time Indo-Guyanese activist in Guyanese politics, Rupert Roopnaraine, recounted the history of Guyana from the 1950s. He declared that after an initially hopeful moment, there was an unresolved political struggle in the 1950s that set the stage for the current political polarization in Guyana between descendants of Indians and Africans. During his passionate address, Roopnaraine stated, “we entered independence in this condition…not united…We got our independence as pre-nations.” Roopnaraine insinuated that unity, or some level of cohesiveness, was a precondition for true nationhood.

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In this gathering of the Guyanese diaspora, here was a respected activist arguing that Guyana had not been ready for independence. Members of the audience and the organizer lambasted Roopnaraine for giving them an unnecessary history lesson. Noting that the purpose of the event was to look to the future, one person muttered, “we do not need to rehash the past.” But the past hovered in the tensions that clouded the room: tension about how history was recounted; tension about political parties and ideology; and tension around race. In this gathering of the Guyanese diaspora, here was a respected activist arguing that Guyana had not been ready for independence and that the roots of the crisis of ethnic polarization in politics resided in this critical period during the 1950s.

What happened in that room reflects larger tensions in Guyana that ripple throughout the diaspora. It would seem that this pre-independence period scarred the postcolonial moment, and its wounds are deep and festering. In Guyana, ethnic and ideological division fracture the very telling of history. Roopnaraine was certainly correct in saying that British Guiana entered independence with a contested nationality.

**Project Description**

In the views of many scholars, British Guiana would come to represent a colonial tragedy. In 1953, as part of an experiment in internal self-government and universal suffrage, the people of British Guiana elected the multiracial Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) to power. It was a moment filled with the exhilaration of possibility. However, the British, in the heat of the Cold War and concerned about the Communist orientation of the PPP, invaded and deposed this elected government. The aftermath of this intervention was severe. Due to both internal forces and external pressure, the PPP split along racial lines in 1955. Race riots plagued the country in the early 1960s, and British Guiana entered independence politically divided and ethnically split.
This idea of colonial tragedy resides in the Cold War interventions by the British and later the United States, the violent racial tension between Blacks and East Indians that exploded in the period immediately preceding independence, and the colony’s fraught transition to independence in 1966. The independent country, renamed Guyana, had been forged in ethnic violence.

The struggles of the 1950s certainly set the stage for the violent outbreaks that took place during the early 1960s. However, the seeds of ethnic polarization were sown long before the 1950s. They dwelled in the British colonial strategy of “divide and rule” exercised so successfully throughout the British Empire. Thrown together in the name of “King Sugar,” Africans and East Indians had been pitted against each other for generations by planters and colonial government.

Yet there were moments where another possibility emerged. Roopnaraine evoked the year 1953—when Guianese elected the PPP—as his example. In my project, “The 1935 Rebellions and the Politics of African-Indian Solidarity in British Guiana,” I draw attention to another year, 1935, to highlight moments of historical possibility—when Indian and African youth, women, and men, who comprised the sugar plantation labor force in British Guiana, launched a series of strikes that sent shock waves across the British Empire. Joining the circle of rebellions that shook the Caribbean throughout the decade, their actions caused massive political, social and economic unrest. British officials worked to understand what precipitated the protests and to preserve their own interests. Administrators in India, who had recently considered creating a new Indian colony in British Guiana, wrote the Colonial Office concerned about their compatriots across the Atlantic. Locally, workers likened their cause to that of Ethiopia, a

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6 The year 1953 is highly lauded in the public and political imagination as a time when there was racial coalition—and indeed often as the moment when a different Guyana was possible. There are dissenting voices. For example, see page 4 of David Hinds’ work Ethno-Politics and Power-Sharing in Guyana: History and Discourse (New Academia Publishing: Washington, D.C., 2010). He argues that the multiracial coalition of 1953 was actually quite fragile—“a coalition united mostly in its desire to win.”
country that was rallying the world to come to its defense against Mussolini’s invasion. The story of 1935 is a story about the development of modern politics, overlapping diasporas, the seeds of solidarity, and historical possibility.

Based on extensive archival research in Guyana, the United Kingdom, and the United States, this dissertation argues that plantation workers were central to the early evolution of modern politics in British Guiana. The plantation is often framed as a site of power, labor and economic causality associated with tradition. However, this work expands the literature that examines the lives of working people and how they built sophisticated political strategies to advocate for their interests, both locally and internationally. There are no monographs on these labor rebellions by Indian and Black plantation workers, and the 1930s remain understudied in British Guiana’s history.

This work also explores political notions of African-ness and Indian-ness and the idea of “overlapping diasporas.” The British brought these two populations to British Guiana to serve as laborers under different time periods and circumstances. How did their historical realities affect their daily relations, their identities, their relationship to “homelands,” and their pursuit of possibility in British Guiana? During the 1930s, political blackness in British Guiana performed important cultural and political work. It provided a basis for Afro-Guyanese women and men 1) to engage in religious and cultural uplift for a population almost a century away from slavery; 2) to articulate an insurgent identity against British colonizers and planters; and 3) to forge connections with the wider Black world, particularly during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Indo-Guianese in British Guiana forged a political and cultural identity based on 1) the fight for

7 The main archives I used included the Walter Rodney National Archives, the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, the Caribbean Research Library at the University of Guyana, and the Caricom Documentation Centre, all located in Guyana; the National Archives of the UK, the London Metropolitan Archives, the British Library, and the SOAS Archives and Special Collections, all located in the United Kingdom; and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Benson Latin American Collections at the University of Texas, Austin, in the United States.
inclusion and basic rights for a population less than two decades removed from indentured servitude; 2) efforts to maintain Indian languages and cultural ideals; and 3) ongoing connections to India. Yet, at times, both groups also constructed identities *in opposition to* each other.

From the vantage point of the 1935 rebellions, then, this dissertation explores the possibility of solidarity. What does it mean to interpret the history of British Guiana through the lens of solidarity as opposed to the more prevalent focus on conflict? Historically divided by colonial racism and subject to the needs of capital, plantation workers experienced a shared sense of suffering and subordination. I investigate how cross-racial solidarity was imagined and enacted in British Guiana and what light it sheds on Guyanese realities today. Joint action did not imply or provoke an eradication of racialized identity. Rather, I argue that workers employed these identities as a basis for concerted action, as well as a means of envisioning expanded anti-colonial international connections. Far from a triumphalist narrative, my project attempts to historicize frames of reference, identities, and aspirations that emerged during the struggle of the 1930s that both constrain current thinking and highlight the unfulfilled visions of working people in Guyana.

This introduction explores the early theorization of Caribbean society and culture with an emphasis on the plantation. It argues that the dominant paradigm for understanding the Guyanese political and ethnic situation has been cultural pluralism, which emphasizes the idea of fully separate cultural segments in a society. By extension, this type of analysis tends to center racial conflict. I also highlight the scholarship that has provided a foundational basis for and influenced the development of this project. Finally, I give an overview of the chapters that make up this study, and add commentary on the significance of this research.
On The Nature of the Caribbean: Theorizing Plantation Societies

The Caribbean was home to a vibrant debate over the nature of its societies and the cultural identity of its inhabitants. Imperialism brought together an array of peoples to the region. From C. L. R. James to Walter Rodney, Caribbeanists have striven to understand the type of societies, institutions, and inequalities that developed out of plantation economies, as well as the significant impact of sugar-led development. They have drawn on theories from cultural pluralism to creolization to forge answers. This dissertation follows the line of argument that affirms the plantation and diaspora as defining features of Caribbean history and life, and ultimately emphasizes that new cultures of integration were being forged through action on the plantation, even as the society exhibited distinct cultural, racialized, and diasporic elements.

This section highlights a fundamental historical discussion in order to discuss the concern with which early theorists fundamentally engaged: how these countries of the Caribbean, created in the name of sugar, could become self-determining undergirded by a unifying culture. The world politics of the era demanded political organization in the form of nations. Although the strategy of nation was never a given in the Caribbean, these questions animated thinkers for generations.

In 1938, the Trinidadian intellectual C. L. R. James published *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* while he was living in London. Writing in the milieu of Pan-African movement, James charted the history of the revolutionary slave revolt in Saint-Domingue and the establishment of the first Black republic in the Western hemisphere, Haiti. Hailed as the first work to “centre slavery in world history,” *The Black*
Jacobins positioned enslavement at the heart of capitalist modernity. James grappled with the idea of the Caribbean as a modern space and the nature of societies based in plantation economies, slavery, and extraction. He returned to this point in the appendix to his 1963 edition, where he wrote about the “peculiar” nature of West Indian origins and history, and the Cuban Revolution as a contemporary effort to deal with these unique problems as well as with the creation of national identity.

In the context of debates about the West Indian Federation and the possibilities of Caribbean independence, the Jamaican social anthropologist and poet M. G. Smith wrote a series of essays from 1952-1961 that would culminate in a book: *The Plural Societies in the British West Indies*. Using anthropological and sociological methods, he applied J. S. Furnivall’s theory of “plural societies” to the region. Smith argued that the Anglophone Caribbean constituted a series of plural societies—societies divided into sections that had different cultures and institutional forms living side-by-side within the same political units. He concluded that these societies were created and maintained by imperial force, both “de jure and de facto,” and therefore common social will, integration, and unity were not foundational. In fact, deep cultural and institutional stratification and cleavages were the norm. Smith believed that an understanding of the plural nature of West Indian societies and extensive structural change were of the utmost importance in the future of the Caribbean as a region.

Prior to writing about the Caribbean, Smith had spent time in Nigeria writing and

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researching plural societies there. Smith later did extensive fieldwork in Grenada, Carriacou, and Jamaica. His deep interest in understanding the roots of conflict, his belief in the centrality of race and color, his efforts to tease out the social divisions, and his seemingly pessimistic outlook, all made his work controversial. As anthropologist Murray Last wrote in a tribute, “he refused to fudge, in favor of a sugary social solidarity, the crucial divisions he could recognize as a ‘native’ (as he styled himself); nor would he agree to transform the reality of ethnicity and race into the discourse of class and class struggle.”

In 1962, social anthropologist and sociologist Raymond T. Smith published his book *British Guiana*, in which he advanced a very different idea about the types of societies that plantation-centered economies produced, arguing that Guianese shared “common cultural equipment.” He posited that most observers of Guianese society followed the logic of the 1927 British Guiana Commission, that British Guiana was “a congeries of races from all parts of the world with different instincts, different standards and different interests.” Regarding these questions of social structure and fabric, R. T. Smith, who had done years of fieldwork in British Guiana, believed that “the really interesting thing about British Guiana is not the extent of ethnic differences but the degree to which a common culture exists already.” He argued that the integration of the different ethnic groups happened rapidly, due in no small part to the plantation. The plantation, he contended, “was never really a place of work—it was a way of life, a social,

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14 A number of Caribbeanists worked in Africa prior to doing their work on the Caribbean. They were writing about these places in a particular imperial context.  
17 Quoted in Raymond T. Smith, British Guiana, 135.  
18 Raymond T. Smith, British Guiana, 136.
economic, and political system in itself.” The different “ethnic groups were given a basically similar outlook and a common understanding,” partially because of “their common experience of life as plantation labourers, and partly to the fact that there has been very little real contact with the various homelands.”  

In other words, the plantation had given birth to society itself and, by extension, to new cultures.

Raymond T. Smith’s work went to press in the summer of 1961. He was writing after the split of the PPP and the nationalist movement, but prior to the racial riots in British Guiana. He also completed his work before the disintegration of the West Indies Federation (of which British Guiana was not a part). Despite his clear awareness of the challenges facing Caribbean people, he saw the dawning of a heterogeneous “West Indian culture” and ultimately was quite hopeful in his analysis. He saw both the dangers and the exciting possibilities facing the people of British Guiana.

During the 1960s, the height of Anglophone Caribbean decolonization, scholars continued to question whether the cultural fabrics of these societies were strong enough to maintain newly independent states, and the idea of a shared cultural basis as a prerequisite for the development of a nation was prominent. Jamaica and Trinidad would lead the English-speaking Caribbean to independence in August 1962. In 1967, the year after independence was achieved in British Guiana, cultural anthropologist Leo Despres expanded M. G. Smith’s work on pluralism with a case study on the newly formed South American republic. Writing directly against Raymond T. Smith, Despres attempted to demonstrate that British Guiana did not have a common culture upon which to build a nation. Based on fieldwork, census records, colonial and government data, and interviews, Despres argued that British Guiana was a plural society

19 Ibid., 136.
20 Despres, Cultural Pluralism.
because cultural differentiation was marked at both the local and national level.\textsuperscript{21} He argued that cultural differentiation affected all aspects of local life including settlement patterns, work, education, associations, religion, and social life.

Despres used the plural society thesis to understand cultural, societal and political dynamics in British Guiana and its nationalist movement. Nationalism seemed to hold the promise of being an integrating force, but as new nationalist leaders took over colonial governments, they had to transform and change institutions. As a result, these new underdeveloped nations had to deal with the bitter conflict unleashed by attempting to integrate the society that had been largely divided and kept under control by colonial force. According to Despres, nationalism ultimately contributed to the disintegration of and instability in plural societies, particularly those born out of colonialism. Despres explained,

> Thus modern nationalism presents two faces to the world. One reflects the integrative forces organized on the basis of that faint sense of unity which derives from a common injustice. The integrative forces of nationalism are expressed as anticolonialism in the drive for independence and self-government. The other face of nationalism displays the divisive forces that emerge in the process of creating new forms of politico-cultural integration.\textsuperscript{22}

He maintained that the demise of the nationalist movement was due to cultural pluralism and several other factors, including foreign pressure—particularly the role of the United States in dealing with labor, and the role of individual Guyanese leaders and their use of cultural difference to push their own political agendas.

The strength of the plural society thesis was that it forced an examination of the cultural and structural roots of modern conflict and promoted an understanding of the deep challenges

\textsuperscript{21} Despres modified M. G. Smith’s notion of plural society by adding the role of broker institutions (institutions which bridge the gap between local and societal influence) and by distinguishing between maximal and minimal cultural sections. Despres described a plural society as one in which broker institutions project minimal (local) cultural sections and differentiations up to the national level (maximum cultural sections). His idea of broker institutions included government, media, commerce, labor, coops, government agencies, and religion.

\textsuperscript{22} Despres, \textit{Cultural Pluralism}, 13.
that nationalist movements faced in the developing world. Yet this theory was not without its problems: it underestimated the divisions within the cultural sections of society, including class and religion; it was overly deterministic; and it glossed over the integrative aspects of society including relationships, speech, food, the arts, local markets, religion, and, yes, social movements.

Wherever they fell on the political spectrum, however, Caribbeanist scholars largely agreed about the need to look to the plantation as a site for answers. Orlando Patterson’s *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica*, originally published in 1967, specifically considered the centrality of the plantation.²³ Patterson dedicated his book to C. L. R. James. In *The Sociology of Slavery*, he traced the structure of Jamaican society during slavery primarily from the years 1655 to 1834. He examined the socioeconomic structure of ‘Jamaican slave society’—particularly the role of monoculture and absenteeism on the part of masters—and the lives of enslaved Africans, by tracing their ‘origins,’ demographics, labor, skills, socialization, ‘personality,’ social institutions, and the nature of their resistance to slavery. Patterson argued that Jamaica and the West Indian islands “are unique in World history in that they present one of the rare cases of a human society being artificially created for the satisfaction of one clearly defined goal: that of making money through the production of sugar.”²⁴

Patterson maintained that at its base, Jamaica was a collection of autonomous plantations, and that its whole history and structure developed based on this fact. His concluding statement

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²⁴ Ibid., 9.
was very much informed by M. G. Smith’s plural society thesis and Philip Curtin’s 1955 book *Two Jamaicas: The Role of Ideas in a Tropical Colony, 1830-1865*.\(^{25}\) Patterson commented,

…there emerged in the post-emancipation period a dual culture, or as Curtin puts it, ‘two Jamaicas’; one was the Afro-Jamaican cultural system, which was largely a consolidation and revitalization of patterns developed during slavery; the other was the European oriented cultural system, which was the revival of British civilization in the island after its disintegration during slavery. It is this dual cultural pattern which still forms the basis of Jamaican society.\(^{26}\)

Historian Elsa Goveia, a scholar from British Guiana, also wrote in the milieu of Caribbean independence and concluded that enslavement had created a particular type of society in the West Indies. Her work, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century*, argued that slavery was the chief social institution that left a deep legacy, producing societies rooted in inequality, poverty and racism. But Goveia hoped that ultimately the Caribbean would “develop at last a new sense of community, transcending the geographical and political divisions and the alienations of caste and race that have so far marked their common history.”\(^{27}\)

Goveia in many ways would set the historical research agenda for the West Indies. She was the first professor appointed in West Indian history to the University College of the West Indies in 1961, and the first woman to hold a Chair in the College.\(^{28}\) Mary Chamberlain describes Goveia’s work as “creolizing and professionalizing history...”\(^{29}\) Challenging imperialist scholarship on the West Indies, she sought to write history from the vantage point of the region,

\(^{26}\) Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery*, 287.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 181.
to pay close attention to its internal rhythms and sinews, as well as those of the global. Her work echoed the call of the mission of the New World Group of which she was a part—to center theory, inquiry and critical analyses in the fabric and dynamics of the Caribbean. She mentored and inspired a new generation of students, including Kamau Brathwaite.

Indeed, Brathwaite’s work reformulated one of Goveia’s central themes. Rather than using the idea of a slave society, Brathwaite focused on the development of “creole society.”

Through his work *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820*, he issued a direct challenge to Patterson. Brathwaite argued that a new hybrid culture developed from Jamaica’s African and European elements as they confronted their new environments. Brathwaite was one of the most significant early theorists of creolization, highlighting the dynamism and creativity of culture.

Brathwaite was also writing against the “intellectual pessimism” of plural society theorists including M. G. Smith and Despres. He felt that the plural society paradigm was based “on the idea of people sharing common divisions instead of increasingly common values.” Brathwaite acknowledged the racialized dichotomies created by slavery, but he maintained that “fixed within the dehumanizing institution of slavery, were two cultures of people, having to adapt themselves to a new environment and to each other.” He noted that the segment of Caribbean society most susceptible to the plural society thesis were “the educated middle class, the most finished product of unfinished creolization; influential, possessed of shadow power;

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32 Brathwaite, *Creole Society*, 309.
33 Ibid., 310.
34 Ibid., 307.
rootless (eschewing the folk) or Euro-oriented with a local gloss: Creo- or Afro-Saxons.” A point later echoed, historicized and demonstrated by anthropologist Donald Robotham.

Robotham issued a similar critique of M. G. Smith’s ideas about plural society in a public debate in 1980. He argued that the rise and transformation of pluralism examined in M. G. Smith’s work was fundamentally connected to the disillusionment of the middle class nationalist elite in Jamaica, which was both pro-British and anticolonial. Robotham demonstrated the links between the 1952-1961 period in Jamaican political history and corresponding changes to Smith’s ideology. His 1955 articulation of Jamaican society projected an image of a small White apex at the top, a larger Colored segment in the middle, and a massive Black population as the base—three “rigid and impassable ‘cultural sections.’” Later essays advanced an even less optimistic vision of Caribbean societies, arguing that the various cultural sections were held together by force. This signified for Robotham the “death of acculturation” in Smith’s thinking. Any vision of integration or acculturation became limited due to the rigid racism of the conservative forces of the white elite and what Smith saw as the extremism of Black masses. Robotham concluded that Smith’s conception of pluralism was a helpful reminder about the social and ethnic cleavages in Caribbean societies, but was nonetheless severely flawed.

Despite the power and persistence of ideas about creolization in the wider Anglophone Caribbean, the scholarship on Guyana continues to rely heavily on the plural society thesis. Even when scholars haven’t directly employed the language of plural societies, the framework in play

35 Ibid., 311.
37 Robotham, “Pluralism as an Ideology,” 83.
38 Ibid., 85.
39 Ibid., 87.
This thinking is exhibited in scholars Tara Singh’s and Dhanpaul Narine’s preface to their article “Powersharing in a Plural Society,” wherein they maintained that “the founders of the Guyanese nation had envisaged a society in which all peoples (the six races) would mingle, live in peace, and share a common destiny. This has not happened.”

This debate is the intellectual terrain upon which my dissertation is fashioned. The pluralists were not wrong. There are elements of society, which remain stubbornly pluralist, for better or worse. They may have overemphasized conflict, but the conflict that they saw continues to exist in the realm of politics. While there is more creolization in Guyana than most have allowed for, it is not complete, as it most likely can never be. It is also possible that creolization, as several scholars have recently argued, is a process that has privileged the mixture of European and African creole cultures above others.

My study argues that the seeds of a common culture and consciousness were forged through protest in the heart of the plantation. As a space, the plantation served as a site for the reproduction of the divisions of the society, but it also simultaneously served as a site for a politics that fundamentally challenged these very same divisions and hierarchical arrangements. This phenomenon existed alongside a manifestation of overlapping diasporas and the cultures of indigenous populations. My focus here is on African and Indian laboring populations and argues that they were constantly engaged in creating new political cultures. I build on generations of work by scholars of the Guyanese experience.

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Relevant Literature

The 1930s represented a major moment of labor rebellions throughout the Caribbean and globally. Yet this period remains understudied in the history of Guyana; the bulk of social and political history as well as cultural work on Guyana focuses on the period after 1945. Even long durée works often do not have more than a few pages on the period. There are a few notable exceptions, including Nigel Bolland’s *On the March: Labour Rebellions in the British Caribbean, 1934-1939*, which contains a chapter on British Guiana in the 1930s; Clem Seecharan’s *Sweetening Bitter Sugar: Jock Campbell, the Booker Reformer in British Guiana, 1934-1966*, which includes a significant section on the 1930s; Basdeo Mangru’s *A History of East Indian Resistance on the Guyana Sugar Estates, 1869-1948*, which has a chapter on labor

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uprisings in the 1930s; and *Mother India’s Shadow Over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s*, which provides several chapters on the 1930s. This section focuses on the literature of Guyana to discuss the scholarship that laid the groundwork and opened up the possibility for this study.

This dissertation builds on several foundational texts that explore themes of race, labor, gender, plantation economies, and the sugar industry. One work of particular importance is Ashton Chase’s *A History of Trade Unionism in Guyana, 1900-1961*. Chase used organizational documents, colonial reports, newspaper articles, and first-hand knowledge to chronicle the development of the trade union movement in British Guiana. According to Chase, he focused mostly on the recording of events rather than analysis. However, he deployed a Marxist perspective throughout the work, informing his choice of events, his commentary, and his interpretation of particular trade unions. Chase’s work mentions early attempts at worker organization commencing with the first official trade union, the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU) established in 1919. The bulk of the work focused on the late 1940s through to an epilogue about the 1961 to 1964 period. This work has been an important resource for anyone

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49 Chase was a long-time trade unionist, beginning in the 1930s as a young person, who rose to become General Secretary of the British Guiana Labour Union and later was a founding member of the Peoples Progressive Party. He served as the Minister of Labour, Industry and Commerce in the Jagan government in 1953.
50 When Chase was writing this work, there was precious little written about trade unions in British Guiana.
51 There are only a few pages on the events of the 1930s, mainly focused on the Moyne Commission and the Leonora strikes of 1938. He mentions the 1935 strikes very briefly; their lack of significant mention may be due to lack of information at the time and to his focus on trade unions (these strike actions were coordinated yet decentralized).
examining labor in British Guiana, and his discussion of the early 1960s was certainly before its time.\textsuperscript{52}

During the upheaval of the 1970s, historian and activist Walter Rodney wrote another landmark text in British Guianese history, \textit{A History of Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905}, published posthumously in 1981 after his assassination.\textsuperscript{53} During the mid and late 1970s, Rodney was working in opposition to Guyana’s authoritarian regime in a multiracial organization, The Working Peoples Alliance. A student of C. L. R. James and a committed Pan-Africanist, Rodney utilized a Marxist analysis in his approach to this social history of Guyanese working people, which was marked by his own activism among African and Indian communities. In his scholarly work, Rodney demonstrated the role and struggles of working people in national development and highlighted British Guiana’s political economy—particularly, how planters and imperial capitalism made the Caribbean a center for plantations, raw materials, and cheap labor.

Focused on the late nineteenth century, Rodney argued that the capitalist class was fully emerged and well-defined in British Guiana, but “the differentiation of working class, peasantry, and middle class was incomplete.”\textsuperscript{54} Rodney described how planters and colonial government made every effort to maintain African labor on the plantations and limited African access to land following emancipation. Despite these efforts, Africans and their descendants quickly transitioned to become urban workers, peasantry, or some hybrid of the two. Importation of

\textsuperscript{52} Chase mentioned but de-emphasized the racial nature of the strikes and riots of this period. He asserted instead that by 1961 the trade unions in British Guiana were corrupted by outside forces in the United States interested in overthrowing the elected Communist-oriented government, as well as by inside forces in the unions themselves interested more in gaining political power than the advancement of working people.

\textsuperscript{53} Walter Rodney, \textit{A History of Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). Rodney’s death by a walkie-talkie bomb is largely believed to be an assassination ordered by the Guyanese government against which Rodney was organizing. Authoritarian in its orientation, the government was using repressive methods to counter dissent. In 2014, a Commission of Inquiry was launched to investigate state terrorism of the period, including the death of Walter Rodney. See Kevin Edmunds, “After 34 years, Walter Rodney’s Assassination in Guyana now Under Review,” \textit{NACLA}, May 7, 2014, accessed April 21, 2015, https://nacla.org/blog/2014/5/7/after-34-years-walter-rodneys-assassination-guyana-now-under-review

\textsuperscript{54} Rodney, \textit{A History}, 218.
indentured labor mostly from India but also from China, Madeira, and other parts of the empire became a way of accessing a controllable labor force.

Rodney continued by examining the policy related to Indian indentured labor, the conditions and stereotypes these workers faced, and how they challenged a system designed to control them. He also described how race was used to divide the labor force in the interests of the sugar industry. He concluded that there was less conflict between Indians and Africans than one would expect given the economic competition. However, the development of a “plantation workers’ movement” was constrained and retarded due to the uses of “indentureship and racial competition.” Yet the riots of 1905, where he concluded the book, “set the stage for advance toward trade union organization.” Even though what occurred in 1905 was more spontaneous than organized, groundwork had been laid for later movements. Rodney’s work created the historical framework that helps to explain the later development of trade unions in British Guiana during the twentieth century, where Chase’s work is focused.

*Plantations, Peasants and State: A Study of the Mode of Sugar Production in Guyana,* written in the 1980s by economist and activist Clive Thomas, is a dependency analysis of the sugar industry in Guyana, focused primarily on the post-World War II period through to the early 1980s. Building on Rodney’s work on the nineteenth century, Thomas argued, “sugar production has been the major economic activity underlying the colonial penetration, later capitalist consolidation, and subsequent underdevelopment of the national economy of Guyana.” Thomas’ work exhibited a keen understanding of the sugar industry, labor, the state, and the unique environmental challenges of drainage and irrigation in Guyana. It is also the only

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55 Ibid., 219.
56 Ibid.
58 Ibid., xv.
work that spotlights the long history of the sugar industry in the country and how it changed under colonialism through to the state-dominated economy of the 1970s and early 1980s.

Nigel Bolland’s *On the March*, published in 1995, included a chapter where he argued that despite British Guiana’s long history of labor militancy, the country did not have the level of labor rebellion that occurred in other British Caribbean colonies like Jamaica and Trinidad during the 1930s. Bolland acknowledged that the Caribbean Labor Congress had its roots in the efforts made specifically by Guyanese leaders to reach beyond their shores in solidarity with other labor organizations in other parts of the Caribbean and the world, but he argued that in British Guiana itself, the labor movement was debilitated by racial and ethnic division, and was not connected to nationalist struggle. Bolland stated the following:

Despite the fact that the working people of Guyana were in the same leaky colonial boat, or perhaps because they were put in the situation of competing with each other for their places in that boat, their labour organisations came to reflect the ethnic segmentation of the wider society, and the more divided the labour movement, the weaker it was.

Part of the work of my dissertation is to elaborate on the differences in the historical position of Black and Indian sugar workers during the 1930s. I believe that different institutions emerged in the late 1930s precisely because the needs of these groups of workers were not the same. An initially unified labor organization from the 1920s (the BGLU) was not able to fully meet the needs of workers who faced very different challenges, even when serving on the same plantations—issues of language, immigration, culture, history, and even labor situation: one group tended to live on the plantations in homes and/or land owned by the estates, and the other lived primarily off the estates in their own villages; one group was largely urban, while the other was still largely rural in the 1930s. Ethnically separate labor organizations did not translate into a

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60 Ibid., 171.
divided movement, at least not initially. My hypothesis is twofold: 1) there were seeds of cross-racial solidarity among “unorganized labor” through action, as exemplified in the labor rebellions of 1935, and 2) that the separate formal ethnic organizations that emerged based on different needs actually created the possibility for a multiracial organization based on class and colonial position to emerge in the late 1940s, and to the election of the PPP in 1953.

In Basdeo Mangru’s *A History of East Indian Resistance on the Guyana Sugar Estates, 1869-1948*, published in 1996, the chapter “Unrest in the Mid-1930s” is the most comprehensive coverage of the 1935 strikes to date.\(^{61}\) His chapter discussed the early organizations that worked with sugar workers, the events of 1935, the commission report of 1935, the situation of Indians in British Guiana broadly, and particularly the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA) fight against discrimination in the civil service and the repatriation controversies of 1938.\(^{62}\) Mangru demonstrated that the strikes represented the discontent and precarious situation of sugar workers and concluded that government was less concerned about sugar workers than it was about law and order. The overall focus of his work is to refute stereotypes about Indian docility by examining the long history of Indian resistance in British Guiana.

My work builds on and benefits from Mangru’s analysis of Indian resistance and his examination of the 1935 strikes in particular. I cosign his findings of worker militancy and his argument that the heart of governmental concern was law and order. However, Mangru’s discussion of the strikes is limited to worker demands and a few sentences about what actually happened. He used the Commission report and testimony from four persons. Consequently, although I agree with his broader points, our understandings of the strikes depart significantly as

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\(^{62}\) Mangru believed that the BGEIA was an ardent advocate for the Indian community but contended that its base was mostly middle class and somewhat removed from the lives of estate workers.
well. Mangru mentioned Black workers and Ethiopia only in passing, nor did he question the commission report’s overall focus on Indian labor, presumably justified by the dominance of Indians in the sugar industry. Additionally, where I see a larger movement, Mangru viewed the strikes as “spontaneous and localized, originating in specific grievances and affecting a small corps of workers.” He also stated that the BGLU had an Indian section but that organizationally it focused on Georgetown and did not influence life on the plantations. Therefore, Mangru did not highlight any connection of the strikes to the BGLU, nor did he mention their ubiquitous red flags—a cultural component of most of the strikes, which allows them to be tied together in my research.

Clem Seecharan’s work, *Sweetening “Bitter Sugar”: Jock Campbell, the Booker Reformer in British Guiana*, published in 2005, is a work aimed to recover (and rehabilitate) Jock Campbell, chairman of Bookers’ estates—the largest and most important sugar plantations in the country. Seecharan wrote a well-researched and sensitive biography based on colonial documents, interviews, newspapers, plantation records, and his own experience growing up on a plantation in British Guiana. This book is centrally about Campbell, but it brings the plight of sugar workers of the time into clear relief.

In Chapter 6, “Trouble On the Plantations, 1935: Workers Demand Change,” Seecharan highlighted Campbell’s reformer voice: his recognition that workers were becoming more militant and educated, and his advocacy for change in the sugar industry. He believed it would suffer collapse if it was not modernized. Regarding the strikes of 1935, Seecharan upheld the idea “that the African minority in the plantation workforce demonstrated greater militancy in

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63 Mangru, *A History*, 205 and 211.
64 The red flags appear at most of the rebellions and they were associated with the British Guiana Labour Union.
My dissertation demonstrates otherwise. Seecharan’s understanding of the strikes is based on an examination of the final report, rather than the actual testimonies. Although he acknowledged the influence of the BGLU in the strikes, he maintained that Indian workers did not have a union.

At various points in the overall work, Seecharan juxtaposed the leadership of Cheddi Jagan (leader of the Peoples Progressive Party) with that of Jock Campbell. In fact, Seecharan’s book opens with a quote from Cheddi Jagan’s pamphlet *Bitter Sugar* from 1953, where Jagan charged his audience: “Join the fight against sugar imperialism. Make B.G. British Guiana and not Booker’s Guiana.” Seecharan’s intervention—his rehabilitation of Campbell from the proverbial nationalist enemies of British Guiana list—is a worthy one. Seecharan’s work recasts Campbell as a realistic reformer, humanist, and Fabian Socialist who was desperately concerned with ameliorating the situation of sugar workers (despite the fact that his wealth was built on their labor). Cheddi Jagan however, did not receive such sensitive treatment. Seecharan positioned Jagan as an extremist and naïve Communist who used empty Soviet slogans. Although Seecharan’s demonstration of Jagan’s race-baiting adds an important and seldom-discussed dimension to analysis of Jagan’s impact, Jagan’s politics and his importance in Guyanese history are flattened in the service of restoring Campbell.

A much more nuanced examination of Cheddi Jagan is historian Colin Palmer’s *Cheddi Jagan and the Politics of Power: British Guiana’s Struggle for Independence*, which is a tragic

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67 His main sources for his discussion of the strikes in this chapter are the Commission Report, a police report from 1934, newspaper articles, and two letters.
69 For example, Seecharan highlighted this quote from Campbell from a 1969 speech to the Fabian Society: “‘The plantocracy had great power in Government—did all they could to prevent other industries in order to maintain a surplus of labour. This was an industry founded on slavery, continued on the indenture system, maintained on the exploitation of African and Indian workers.’” Ibid., 61.
and powerful story of a people whose efforts to achieve self-determination are thwarted at every turn by Cold War interventions, by the devastating mistakes and opportunism of Guiana’s key leaders, and by the country’s complex history of colonialism and ethnic tensions. Based on extensive and underutilized colonial documents as well as newspapers, the book begins with the election of Cheddi Jagan and the multiracial PPP to government in 1953 and their swift removal by the British, who feared the party’s nationalist rhetoric and communist influence. It ends in 1964 with the advent of the system of proportional representation, designed in large measure to keep Jagan and the Peoples Progressive Party out of power. In this work, Palmer has inadvertently heeded David Scott’s call to write Caribbean history centered in the notion of tragedy. Yet he managed to capture the aspirations of Guianese people on the eve of independence. I view my research on 1935 as a building block for a larger work about the seeds of solidarity that allowed for the elections and political moment of 1953, where Palmer’s work begins.

The works covered in this section have laid the groundwork for my research on the 1935 labor rebellions in British Guiana. Chase and Rodney, as mentioned above, have most strongly influenced my work. Chase is, quite simply, a pioneer in twentieth century British Guiana labor history. Rodney’s ground-breaking work provided a model for me in his ability to capture both the constraints on and abilities of working people. I was particularly inspired by his nuanced approach to the history of the late nineteenth century, which was formative for the period I study. I too am motivated by his political imperative. Although the content and substance of the struggle in Guyana is quite different today than it was during the 1970s, Rodney’s warning about

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70 Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*. 

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not reading racial conflict back into the past nor mapping it deterministically into the future is also fundamental to my project.

Eric Huntley’s 1965 talk, “Notes on the Popular History of Guyana, 1930s” convinced me that this was a period worthy of study, and the breadth of Bolland’s work helped me place these strikes in the context of the broader Anglophone Caribbean. Seecharan’s coverage of the strikes in his biography of Jock Campbell was my introduction to the strikes of 1935. His sensitivity to and intimate knowledge about sugar workers and plantation life in British Guiana, as well as his demonstration of Campbell as a reformer, encouraged me to be attentive to what was at stake for various protagonists, to highlight plantation life and to pay attention to nuance when examining the planter class. Thomas gave me a sense of the long history of sugar dominance in British Guiana. I did not come across Mangru’s work until after I completed most of the research for my dissertation; however, his work reaffirmed my idea that Indians were not passive followers or people who were coerced into action by Africans during the strikes of 1935.

Alissa Trotz’s and Linda Peake’s work, Gender, Ethnicity and Place: Women and Identities in Guyana, Verene Shephard’s book Maharani’s Misery, and Gaiutra Bahadur’s book Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture were particularly helpful for thinking through the context and the lives of women brought to work on the sugar plantations in British Guiana and their racialization. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the debt to the work of Basdeo Mangru, who also recovered and reprinted C. F. Andrews’ report, originally published in 1930,

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71 Eric Huntley gave this talk at a Guyana Symposium in October, 1965. I found this paper at the London Metropolitan Archives. Huntley was a founding member of the PPP.
which is a critical primary source for my second chapter, and the book *Mother India’s Shadow* by Clem Seecharan, which helped provide historical context on Indian-Guianese during this period.\(^{73}\)

Colin Palmer’s work *The Politics of Power* was striking in his artful storytelling, his breadth of colonial sources, his insightful analysis, and his ability avoid ethnic and ideological polarization in his writing about a period of disintegration. I also read his manuscript for *Freedom’s Children: The 1938 Labor Rebellion and the Birth of Modern Jamaica* as I was doing my research for this project.\(^{74}\) Through previously unmined sources and centering race within its analysis, this book ended up revising much of what was known about the Jamaica strikes of 1938 and the subsequent rise of two of Jamaica’s national heroes and political parties. Palmer’s work provided me with important contextual information about the British Empire and helped me to identify similarities and stark differences between what happened in Jamaica and what happened in British Guiana. Although this list is not comprehensive, all of these scholars provided the foundation of my work and thinking on this research, and without them, this project would not have been possible.

**Chapter Outline**

Chapter One, “Seeds of Division” briefly explores the history of colonization through a discussion of indigenous marginalization; the history of slavery and indentured servitude; and the development of colonial politics, particularly the return to Crown Colony government in 1928. By analyzing the nature of British colonialism in the first third of the twentieth century, I seek to

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understand the dominance of the sugar industry in British Guiana and how the laboring populations of the plantation system became racialized.

During the 1930s, African Guianese celebrated the centennial of their emancipation from enslavement, while Indian Guianese celebrated the centennial of their arrival in the colony. Chapter Two, “Overlapping Diasporas During the 1930s,” draws on archival sources, census records, poetry, and biography to reconstruct the harshness of laborers’ daily lives, the hydraulic environment of British Guiana, and the rhythms of plantation life during this turbulent decade marked by economic and environmental crisis. It also considers the articulations of diaspora animating African and Indian communities. Concerned about building international ties, these workers were fundamentally translocal actors.

Chapter Three, “‘Slavery Done Long Time’: The Rebellions of 1935,” traces the spread of labor unrest in 1935 across various plantations with a spotlight on the demands and experiences of workers. I argue that despite the intricate dimensions of race, labor, age, and gender, this moment demonstrates active cooperation among communities who took on the sugar industry and the colonial state in a moment of international fervor. In this case, strong racial identities did not preclude joint action. This chapter demonstrates that laborers were not only aware of their own position within the colonial economy, but connected their interests to global concerns of their day, particularly the invasion of Ethiopia and ideas about communism.

Chapter Four, “‘I Thought the People Had Gone Crazy’: Circuits of Colonial Anxiety,” explores the initial interpretations of the strikes by the colonial press, the governor of British Guiana, representatives of British India, the Colonial Office, the local police, plantation staff, and a key labor leader. I tease out what was at stake for the various elites involved in shutting down, assessing, and/or mediating the strikes. Despite the differences in their motivations and
actions, they exhibited a common analysis about the collective ignorance of those who were involved in the labor disturbances. Elite responses to the disturbances highlight the racial and ideological anxieties of colonialism, the challenge of governability, and tensions between the imperial and the local. I discuss empire, race and labor relations in the 1930s, when the very character of British imperialism was in flux.

Chapter Five is entitled “Seeds of Solidarity: The Aftermath of the Rebellions and Historical Possibility.” Through analysis of the report issued by the commission tasked with investigating the unrest, newspaper articles, governmental documents, and colonial correspondence, this chapter details the losses suffered by the individuals, communities, and the plantation economy. This chapter also highlights the aspirations of Guianese workers in the wake of the rebellions and the ways in which the mediated solutions narrowed a broader vision. I also argue that the 1935 labor rebellions offer us the historical possibility of solidarity in British Guiana. I also posit a generational argument—that the young people who participated in this understudied movement came of age during the much-referenced watershed moment in 1953—when the people of British Guiana elected the multiracial nationalist and communist-leaning Peoples Progressive Party to power.

Research Significance

This dissertation takes up a history that has for several reasons largely been buried. First, this moment is one that has died in the Guyanese popular imagination because it was a moment buried while it was happening, by the refusal of the press to cover it (at the behest of government) until it had spread out of control. Second, ideologically, it challenged the history of perpetual conflict between Africans and Indians. Third, much more attention has been paid to the
drama of later periods, where great-man (or tragic) figures like Cheddi Jagan and Forbes Burnham dominate. The 1935 rebellions have no “great-man heroes”—unlike in similar events in Trinidad and Jamaica, no leaders emerged from this struggle who become major voices in the nationalist struggles of the 1950s and early 1960s. The labor struggle of 1935 in British Guiana was much more local, more decentralized, and not led by middle-class leaders who did not have their livelihood based in plantation labor. As a result, the personalities involved are smaller, less national, and harder to trace because they did not leave volumes of writing, speeches or papers. Finally, those who have dealt with this history did so in service to a particular project, rather than a full recovery of the event itself—Mangru in service to a multi-year coverage project on Indian resistance, and Seetcharan in service to his biography of Jock Campbell.

Therefore, this work makes a number of scholarly interventions. The 1930s are understudied in British Guiana’s history and this project expands the Caribbean historiography on labor rebellions during the 1930s to include a comprehensive examination of the British Guianese experience. Despite almost 1,000 pages of evidence and testimony, a dedicated commission report, newspaper accounts, and correspondence about the rebellions, there is no full-length work on this movement. Fundamentally, without this story, we do not fully understand the development of modern politics in British Guiana, nor the 1930s unrest that erupted in the wider Caribbean and set change in motion for the British Empire.

“The 1935 Labor Rebellions” also explores the meanings of African-ness and Indian-ness, which took multiple forms and changed over time and circumstance. I seek to help to identify the varying positionality of Africans and Indians in British Guiana. This work is specifically about

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the meanings and realities of overlapping diasporas and as such, it attempts to breathe life into this term by using an on-the-ground example.\textsuperscript{76}

Finally, this work historicizes the project of solidarity that existed in British Guiana, challenging the dominant historical and popular understanding that centers racial conflict. I view the 1930s as a period where the seeds of solidarity were laid amidst very difficult circumstances. Joint action was never a given. Inspired by scholar-activists like the late Walter Rodney, I seek to historically investigate life before the 1960s racial riots in British Guiana and to theorize about the potential basis for solidarity amidst profound structures of difference.

In Vijay Prashad’s \textit{Everybody was Kung-Fu Fighting: Afro Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity}, he identifies Black individuals (including Frederick Douglass and Blanche K. Bruce) who responded to political attacks against the Chinese in the United States. He wrote: “…these early voices are few and far between, and their social effects lie almost entirely in the language of solidarity they have left for us rather than its practice.”\textsuperscript{77} The “practice of solidarity” is what my work attempts to point to: how everyday people mobilized for themselves and their communities—the ways in which people show up together despite a history that has taught them that their experiences are not connected, and worse, are actually diametrically opposed. Examining their actions, I argue that a nascent sense of solidarity was at work.

My focus on “solidarity” is designed to confront the historiography of later periods that locates conflict everywhere, that perceives Indian and Black relations as so fraught that the possibility of collective action is unimaginable. It is also a political choice given the situation

\textsuperscript{76} Earl Lewis, “To Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas,” \textit{The American Historical Review} 100, no. 3 (1995): 765-787.

Guyana faces today, where examining a moment of historical possibility can gesture towards a different future. As the protests that challenged President Ramotar’s power demonstrate, another world remains possible today.
CHAPTER 1 – SEEDS OF DIVISION

Introduction

On October 9, 1935, a crowd of 200-300 Indian and African sugar workers and their allies marched through Plantation Ogle beating drums and carrying red flags, cutlasses, and sticks. At the head of the angry gathering was a man who had been beaten. He too was carrying a red flag, but he was there under duress. Tired of abuse and angry about the worsening labor conditions, the rebelling laborers had “manhandled” Rausch, the deputy plantation manager, and forced him to join the wave of rebellions sweeping through the colony of British Guiana. When asked about the composition of the protestors, plantation manager James Sutherland replied, “they were all mixed up, East Indians and blacks, some residents on the estate and some non-residents.”

What happened on Plantation Ogle characterized the strikes that swept the sugar industry in British Guiana in 1935. African and East Indian workers—the people who comprised the sugar plantation labor force in British Guiana—revolted against the plantation system en masse. Likened by one observer to an “infectious disease,” the strikes spread from one plantation to the next, fundamentally disrupting operations for several months. The protesters’ demands included better wages, improved conditions, the removal of abusive overseers and drivers, and an end to corrupt practices. Workers agitated for their need for representation and voice in a plantation system that provided little recourse for justice. Woven into the fabric of their struggle were diasporic and international concerns about the war Italy waged against Ethiopia and the struggle for independence in India.

1 “Evidence of Mr. James Sutherland” in Labour Disputes Commission, 1935, Evidence of Witnesses, 115-150, CO 111/739/2, National Archives of the UK, London.
2 “Evidence of Mr. James Sutherland,” 119.
The rebellions also illuminated colonial elite anxiety about race, empire and order. Labor unrest plagued the British Empire throughout the 1930s. Many elites considered these workers, who found themselves at the economic bottom of what had become a backwater colony, to be incapable of executing strike action of their own volition. They could not imagine that sugar workers could combine forces to execute a cross-racial and multi-plantation strike. But this is exactly what they did. Responses to their actions would ping-pong across the globe—to other parts of the Caribbean, to Great Britain, and to India.

This chapter discusses the history of colonization in British Guiana by exploring the development of the plantation labor force and constitutional politics. I provide a brief review of the introduction of the population through time and the attendant history of enslavement, emancipation, and indentured servitude. This chapter also investigates constitutional politics in British Guiana on the eve of the 1930s, politics that exposed a rising fear of the growing political power of colored populations in the country. Examining the ways in which colonial society tried to produce and impose difference highlights the importance of the struggles of 1935.

Indigenous Erasure, Systems of Slavery, and Indentured Servitude

The main Indigenous ethnic groups inhabiting the territory that would form British Guiana were the Arawaks, the Caribs, the Warraus, and the Akawois. Europeans traversed the territory as early as the late 16th century, searching for El Dorado, the famed mythical city of gold. Sir Walter Raleigh’s account, *The Discoverie of the Large and Bewtiful Empire of Guiana*, written after his 1595 voyage, generated wide interest across Europe. Although the English and the French established trading posts, and there was occasional Spanish encroachment, it was the Dutch who would eventually dominate the region. The indigenous populations that were present were pushed farther and farther into the interior as a result of European advance. Guyana is one
of the few places in the Caribbean where indigenous people, called Amerindians in the Guyanese context, survived in significant numbers, but they were fundamentally marginalized from national life.

The Dutch were the first to establish sugar plantations during the 1630s. During the 17th century, they brought enslaved African people to work on cotton, coffee, and sugar plantations and to subdue a particularly harsh landscape. Even under Dutch rule, British enterprise in what became known as Demerara sugar was rapidly increasing. Through the Transatlantic Slave Trade, between the years of 1796 and 1842, over 72,000 enslaved Africans disembarked in the territory that became British Guiana to quench the insatiable labor needs.\(^3\) In 1814, the British Empire obtained the territory from the Dutch, and in 1831, it united the colonies of Demerara-Essequibo and Berbice into one British Guiana.

In *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*, activist-historian Walter Rodney emphasized that although they brought the technology, the Dutch were too few in number to build dams and dig canals. The need to control water through man-made artifices was critical in these environments because the land mass lay below sea level. Dutch entrepreneurs “merely supervised the labor of Africans subjected to slavery.”\(^4\) The Venn Commission of 1948 noted that in the original construction, 100 million tons of soil had to be moved to create the miles of canals and waterways for drainage, transport, and irrigation. Rodney accurately concluded, “This meant that slaves moved the 100 million tons of heavy, water-logged clay with shovel in hand, while enduring conditions of perpetual mud and water.”\(^5\)


\(^5\) Ibid., 3.
The British abolished slavery in 1834 and paid a heavy indemnification to the slave-holding planter population. British policy-makers instituted a system of apprenticeship designed in theory to introduce the formerly enslaved and former slave-owners to wage labor. In practice, the apprentice system was a form of neo-slavery under which apprentices remained on the plantation unpaid for a minimum of 40.5 hours per week. Starting in 1834, those enslaved in the fields would be apprenticed for six years, while house slaves would be released from apprenticeship in four years, by 1838.\(^6\)

Even before the apprenticeship period came to an end, planters sought to experiment with new forms of labor. They turned to indentured immigration to secure a stable workforce whose wages could be regulated and who could be tied to the plantation.\(^7\) As Madhavi Kale explained in her work *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean*, the turn to indentured labor was an imperial labor reallocation strategy.\(^8\) Imperialism brought people from far-flung empires to labor on plantations. Tapping into the networks of empire, over time merchants brought indentured laborers from South Asia; the West Indies; the Portuguese Atlantic islands of Madeira, Azores, and Cape Verde; other parts of Africa; China; and Malta.\(^9\) They eventually settled on Indian workers as the main indentured workforce. Kale explained,

> Indians seemed to be ideal to these men because they were from overseas and would be dependent and coercible, and because they were accessible—‘free’ to be used to discipline the black laboring population, nearly-emancipated from slavery.\(^10\)

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The shadow of slavery haunted the indenture process from its inception. Abolitionists launched into action, likening indenture to a new form of enslavement. Fearing neo-slavery charges, the government of India was vigilant about the contract process. Planters believed that the arrival of new labor would guarantee the estates a bound Indian workforce and independence from the formerly enslaved population. They hoped that the arrival of indentured servants would undermine the newly-found “freedom” of the Africans, pushing them to submit to planter requirements. As they would soon realize, both populations would constantly challenge these arrangements.

After the end of apprenticeship in 1838, as planters anticipated, Africans began to move away from plantations. In spite of the colonial government’s and planters’ efforts to minimize mobility and erect barriers to collective landownership, formerly enslaved people created new villages or joined villages that had been created by maroons. As Sara Abraham observed, “while emancipation had given people the freedom to move off the plantations, control wielded by the planters through the Court of Policy and the Combined Court, the legislative and executive offices of the state, ensured that there was no support for the purchase of land, the maintenance of drainage infrastructure, or the supply of vital services to Africans in the villages. The burden of those costs fell on the villagers themselves.” They took up small-scale farming on their own plots of land. Engaged in the process of re-engineering their lives, they began to prioritize village rhythms over the needs of the estates. They organized themselves into task

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11 Ibid., 13-14 and 17, 22.
12 See Garner, Guyana, 1838-1985, 47, based on Kimani Nehusi’s work on villages in Guyana.
14 Rodney, A History, 43.
gangs, negotiating working arrangements with the plantations, often withdrawing their labor when their prices were not met. As Rodney argued, shortly after emancipation, the “new wage-earning class was acting in certain respects like a modern proletariat.”

British Guiana would become home to the largest number of Indian indentures brought to the Americas during the 19th century. Between 1838 and 1917, 429,623 Indians came to the Caribbean as laborers; 55% or 238,909 settled in British Guiana, while 33.5% went to Trinidad. Two-thirds of those who came remained in the country beyond their contract period. Desperate to maintain their labor force, plantation owners offered land grants to ex-indentures and the colonial government also relaxed the prohibitive land laws that stifled the African village movements. Both measures helped to stimulate Indian movement away from estates and into villages once their circumstances allowed. However, indentured servitude continued its official end in 1917.

The populations of Indians and Africans can be considered overlapping diasporas. As descendants of enslaved people and indentured servants respectively, they endured different experiences of racialized historical labor exploitation in British Guiana. By 1921, after the end of the indenture system, Indians represented 41.97% and Africans represented 39.36% of the

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15 Sara Abraham suggested that task-gang labor organization was developed under slavery. “Labor contractors took gangs of slaves around from plantation to plantation, selling their labor. Planters hired slaves out to work, as cotton, coffee, and sugar had different labor cycles.” Abraham, Labour and the Multiracial Project, 34.


18 Verene Shepherd, Maharani’s Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 3. Shepherd cites the work of Walton Look Lai.

19 Jayawardena, Conflict and Solidarity, 14.

20 Linda Peake and D. Alissa Trotz, Gender, Ethnicity and Place: Women and Identities in Guyana (London: Routledge, 1999), 44.

overall population. The 1931 census reported the following racial breakdown of the population in British Guiana:

Table 1. British Guiana Population Percentages by Race, 1931

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Indians</td>
<td>41.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks or Africans</td>
<td>39.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Races</td>
<td>10.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>2.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amerindians*</td>
<td>2.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europeans</td>
<td>.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race not stated</td>
<td>.11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 1931 Census.*

*The census stated explicitly that census takers were unable to count indigenous populations fully because majority lived in the interior.

Indigenous peoples, who had been pushed away from the coast and largely excluded from coastal plantation economies, were certainly undercounted in the census. Census takers admitted this in 1931 when they wrote,

Following the precedent of the previous Censuses it was decided that the enumeration of the Aboriginal Indians living in their primitive state in the remote parts of the Colony, would prove an expensive and difficult undertaking, and productive of results of but little economic value.

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24 *British Guiana Census, 1931*, v (note K).
Given the taxonomic nature of the British colonial project, to not be counted was to not exist.\textsuperscript{25} Given that indigenous labor did not provide the mainstay for the plantation economies on the coast, it was not considered cost-effective to make the effort to truly include them in the census.\textsuperscript{26} Writing during the 1930s, a former government official in British Guiana described the lack of relationship between the indigenous population and the life of the colony. Amerindians, he wrote, “take no part in the agricultural, political or commercial life of the Colony, the more remote parts of which they inhabit…To this day the aborigines are not, in strictness, citizens of British Guiana.”\textsuperscript{27} Elites widely shared such views about indigenous subjects. British colonial policy toward these communities at this point in time was at best one of benign neglect, even though missionaries made inroads into indigenous communities before the 1930s.

\textbf{The Development of Racialized Identities}

The labor force in the sugar sector, the largest employer in the Guianese economy at the time, was made up of Indian and African workers with a thin veneer of European overseers, managers and owners.\textsuperscript{28} The development of African and Indian identity as separate and distinct had its origins in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. These racialised and colonial categories of “Indian” and “African” were not, however, homogenous communities.

East Indians were often portrayed as foreign and immigrant, but by 1931, 81.5\% of East

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\textsuperscript{25} For interesting discussions of the politics of census-taking in other locales, see chapter two of Vicente L. Rafael, \textit{White Love: And Other Events in Filipino History} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) and chapter 10 of Bernard S. Cohn, \textit{An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays} (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

\textsuperscript{26} Shona Jackson’s book \textit{Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) examines the ways in which a creole identity based on African and Indian labor became a postcolonial identity of belonging and indigeneity that displaced and dispossessed Amerindians. Although she is focused on the 1950s and beyond, she makes the point that Marxist formulations about “working people” as well as ideas about creolization in Guyana and the larger Caribbean have been problematic because these ideas marginalized and excluded indigenous people and by extension continued colonial practice. She also uses settler language to describe African and Indian arrival.

\textsuperscript{27} Cecil Clementi, \textit{A Constitutional History of British Guiana} (London: Macmillan and Co, 1937), 373-375.

Indians living in British Guiana were actually born there. Males also predominated among the East Indian population. The majority spoke English, although it seems a significant percentage of the population also spoke Hindi or Hindustani (and some Tamil). As evidenced by the need for translators during the 1935 strikes and census records, it was not unusual to encounter workers who did not speak English. Religious plurality was the order of the day, with the majority of Indians identifying as Hindu, the second major group identifying as Muslim (“Mohammedans”), and the third largest percentage identifying as Christian.

On the African side, by 1931 an overwhelming 94% majority were Guianese born, but a small percentage was foreign-born—migrants from Africa under the system of indentured servitude and both indentured and free labor from other Caribbean colonies. The African-descended population was English-speaking and majority female. The overwhelming majority identified as Christian, which was broken down in the census into seven categories. Although they are not considered in the census, traditional African religions still held some ground, as evidenced by the announcements in newspapers about arrests for “obeah practices.” Fault lines within the Black population manifested themselves via class and geographic location (that is, urban versus country dwellers). These realities suggest an heterogeneity of experiences within the categories of “Indian” and “African.”

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29 British Guiana Census 1931, xxxiii (table 187 under note 190).
30 Ibid., xvi (table 80).
31 There is a specific section of the 1931 census dedicated to break-out numbers for East Indians at the behest of the Government of India. In the section on literacy, 34.06% of the East Indian population is listed as being able to both read and write – 25.07% in English, 6.67% in Hindu, 2.16% in Hindustani and .11% in Tamil. This does not account for spoken languages, but it does give us a sense of the major daily languages used by the Indian population in Guyana.
33 British Guiana Census 1931, xxxiii (table 187 and note 191); also see page xxx.
34 Ibid., xvi (table 80).
For generations, Guyanese have been taught to view their country as a land of six races: Amerindian, African, East Indian, Portuguese, European, and Chinese. These are census categories that date back to the 19th century. Through practices of job and residential segmentation, taxonomy, and ideology, the colonial state as well as planter society inscribed “degrees of humanity” which were layered on top of realities of ethnic, religious, and cultural difference. Rodney argued that “…there were racial and cultural distinctions which increasingly came to coincide with job specialization and residential separation.”

Feminist scholars D. Allisa Trotz and Linda Peake contended that difference was produced through the “process of recognize….” Bringing a gendered dimension to the discussion of racial formation, they argued that Indian and African women’s positionality in Guyana developed over time in relation to colonial needs and changing stereotypes, as well as through their own searches for autonomy. These scholars’ work demonstrated that “…the context surrounding the introduction of indentured immigrants to the colony produced a situation in which Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese would come to partly recognize themselves and each other in the colonial stereotypes that named them as inherently different.”

The colonial state and planters made efforts over time to separate and play racialized communities against each other. In another article, Peake and Trotz wrote that “these identities which have today become solidified as Afro- and Indo-Guyanese (and essentially different) are themselves the product of the dynamic and changing experiences facing slaves and indentured laborers and their descendants; experiences of family, work, survival and politics that overlap but also diverge.” They posited that these identities were consolidated in the post-

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37 Peake and Trotz, Gender, Ethnicity and Place, 51.
emancipation/indenture period. Despite this concretization of identities and the realities of competition of this period, Rodney’s conclusion about the late 19th century serves as an important reminder: “[R]acial conflict was far less pronounced than might have been expected from the manner in which the two main races were thrown into economic competition.”

The different histories of labor exploitation, the production of difference engendered by the colonial project, and the development of racialized identities during the 19th century and early 20th century are critical to understanding why labor solidarity was not a given in British Guiana. At the same time, Europeans in British Guiana recognized the challenge that the growing African and Indian populations posed to their coveted position at the top of the racial hierarchy in the colony. In 1927, they would be faced with a choice: to expand the limited representative government that existed in British Guiana or to transfer some of their political power over to the Crown in order to stem the tide of a growing colored electorate. They would choose the latter.

“There is Nothing that a Guianese has to learn from an Englishman in Politics”: The Struggle Over the 1928 Constitution

Elite European fear of marginalization manifested itself in an ongoing struggle over the constitution, which ended in 1928. In 1928, British Guiana was awarded a new constitution and a return to crown colony government. The impact of this sweeping change was disenfranchisement for (mainly elite) non-white peoples in British Guiana and the expansion of sugar interests in government. The struggle around the constitutional change gives us a glimpse into colonial ideology and practice of the period.

Sir Cecil Clementi wrote about the effort to change the constitution from a colonial perspective in his book *A Constitutional History of British Guiana*, published in 1937.

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Clementi’s writing was not simply the musings of a casual European traveller, but rather those of a senior public official: he served as the Colonial Secretary of British Guiana from 1913-1922.\textsuperscript{40} Clementi argued that British Guiana had the potential to be a “magnificent province,” but that the pre-1928 constitution stunted the growth of British Guiana by entrusting the franchise to a growing body of non-whites, and Africans in particular.

During the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, efforts were made to experiment with a type of representative government. Clementi concluded that the “result was that there existed in British Guiana neither Crown Colony Government nor Representative Government, but a travesty of both . . . .”\textsuperscript{41} Under the pre-1928 constitution, men with property who met all of the requirements could assume the franchise, which meant that an increasing number of non-whites were voted into the Legislative Council and increasingly dominating the Combined Courts and Courts of Policy.\textsuperscript{42} The Executive Council, on the other hand, was appointed by the governor.

Clementi believed that the non-white peoples of British Guiana were not ready to assume representative government, noting that “the only inhabitants fit to exercise the franchise were those of the European race.”\textsuperscript{43} His writing on this issue typifies imperial propaganda:

Representative Government naturally suggests itself as the system under which men born and bred in Great Britain are entitled to be governed. But, in granting representative institutions to such a colony as British Guiana the real question was: Shall the benefit of these institutions be extended to the great body of the population before it made such an advance in civilization and education as would render it capable of exercising political power? Or are these benefits to be conferred exclusively on the colonists of Anglo-Saxon race?\textsuperscript{44}

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\textsuperscript{40} Cecil Clementi, \textit{A Constitutional History of British Guiana} (London: Macmillan and Co, 1937).
\textsuperscript{41} Clementi, \textit{A Constitutional History}, 377.
\textsuperscript{42} According to Harold Alexander Lutchman, in the Legislature in 1928, there were 18 Whites, 3 Portuguese, 4 Negroes, 2 Mixed, 2 East Indians, and 1 Chinese. In the Executive, there were 9 Whites, 1 Portuguese, 1 Negro, and 1 Chinese. See Harold Alexander Lutchman, \textit{From Colonialism to Co-operative Republic: Aspects of Political Development in Guyana} (Río Piedras: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico, 1974), 200.
\textsuperscript{43} Clementi, \textit{A Constitutional History}, 375.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 377.
Paraphrasing the 19th century governor, Henry Barkly, Clementi agreed that “to mould a miniature model of the British Constitution out of materials as rude as those in British Guiana is a task above the power of man…” Ultimately, Clementi concluded that “political education cannot be ‘crammed’; and it is idle to suppose that the diverse racial elements which form the population of British Guiana will fit themselves for true citizenship more rapidly than was the case in the United Kingdom itself.”

Clementi was simply parroting what conservative elites of Great Britain had articulated for generations: the colonized could not be entrusted to rule themselves—they needed British tutelage. Their tropical environment and lack of European education inhibited their capacity to fully understand the ideals and responsibilities of democracy and the meaning of the “common good.” For some Europeans, influenced by the eugenics of the day, men of color were simply inferior beings.

Clementi argued that the result of this democratic experiment was economic underdevelopment. Blaming “black demagogues” and the sugar interests, he proclaimed that the development of the country was “retarded” because of the uneven focus on coastal areas at the expense of the vast interior. He noted,

The coastal interests dominated the administration; and, not unnaturally, the sugar planters and others whose interests were exclusively on the coast disapproved of spending the colonial revenues or private capital on objects which could not be expected to bring any immediate benefit to that coastal fringe, where all the sugar estates of the Colony are situated.

Clementi’s commentary about the ways in which coastal concerns, particularly those of the sugar industry, dominated the colonial economy of British Guiana echoes a well-worn theme in the history of the country. Railways, drainage, and all public works were concentrated on the coast, mainly in service to the sugar estates. The interior suffered from lack of development, other

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46 Ibid., 385-86.
industries were stifled, and British Guiana operated at a deficit. The sugar industry was highly dependent on a fluctuating world market. For Clementi, this impacted the ability of local government to recruit quality public servants from abroad because of the instability of salaries. Further, he believed that the Crown did not give substantial financial assistance to develop new industry because it exercised limited control of the finances in the colony and therefore would not risk British taxpayer funds.\textsuperscript{47} The lack of financial backing from the Crown resulted in an inability to attract investors and developers of new industry.

While his analysis about sugar industry dominance as a problem is accurate, economic stagnation was not the result of a constitution which in fact provided limited opportunity for representation. Writing decades later about the struggle over the constitution, political scientist Harold Lutchman, who served in an independent Guyana, argued,

\begin{quote}
So long as they [the people of British Guiana] were dependent on the sugar industry, the economic fortunes of the colony were likely to fluctuate with those of that industry, which was itself largely dependent on external forces.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

Although sugar had maintained its influence in the Executive Council (a nominated body), the sugar interests were being weakened in the Legislature: they were voted out during the 1926 elections. Journalist A. R. F. Webber argued that the effort to change the constitution was an effort to cement moneyed interests and remove the voice of the “common people.”\textsuperscript{49} As we will see, the return to Crown Colony government did not result in diversified industry and development of the interior. As Webber predicted, it resulted in the further entrenchment of sugar interests in the colonial administration.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[47] Ibid., 383-84.
\item[48] Ibid., 186.
\item[49] Ibid., 175.
\end{footnotes}
In the fight for reform of the constitution, proponents, including Clementi, attempted to gain Indian support for Crown Colony government. They argued that even though Indian males constituted the overwhelming majority of men in the colony, they had little representation in the electorate and in the governing bodies of the country. The solution? The Crown could represent their interests if empowered to do so. However, Indians were not duped by this justification. A mass movement under the auspices of the United Constitutional Reform League developed opposing the government-sponsored reform of the Constitution. One of the leading groups under the League was the British Guiana East India Association (BGEIA). They saw this maneuver as a “retrograde step.”

Pandy, one of the speakers for the BGEIA described,

…to expect any justice from the Governor and the Secretary of State was absolutely to expect rain in drought…[the proposed change in government] would be a change from a government of sugar into a government of whiteman by the whiteman for the whiteman.

Although for the most part White elites of the colony stood firmly behind the reform, Africans and Indians had a mixed response. For example, the Indian National Congress, a more conservative and smaller spin-off from the BGEIA, supported the reforms. It is important to note, as Lutchman observed, that most people believed that His Majesty’s government had a right to change the constitution if it saw fit. Further, even those “who were opposed to change held no deep bitterness for British Colonialism, and to be sure throughout the meetings against reform it was usual for the proceedings to commence or terminate with the British National Anthem, and, or, ‘Rule Britannia.”

The Secretary of State for the Colonies appointed a constitutional commission in 1927. There were no local members of the commission. Electives sent a delegation to the Secretary of State for the Colonies to plead their case and though they were awarded some concessions, in the

50 Ibid., 173.
51 Quote in Lutchman, From Colonialism, 174 from The Daily Argosy, 11, July 1927.
52 Ibid., 175-76.
final analysis, the conclusion of the commission was that the “Government of British Guiana have never been able to govern.” Clementi’s years of advocacy and the structural forces of power within the colony won out.

The Legislature was dissolved and a new one was created under the Crown’s control. The Court of Policy and Combined Court were abolished. The Legislative Council had 14 elected members, the governor, and 15 *ex officio* and nominated members. The Executive Council would have the governor as president, the Colonial Secretary, the Attorney General, four nominated official members, three nominated unofficial members, and two elected members from the Legislative Council who were chosen by the governor. They maintained reserved special seats for the “sugar and other commercial interests” if they did not receive adequate representation in the elected membership. And finally, in a remarkable twist, in a moment when the power of the franchise became substantially marginalized, it was extended to women who owned property.

Published in 1933, five years after the re-establishment of Crown Colony government in British Guiana, the Trinidadian intellectual C. L. R. James would pen “The Case for West Indian Self-Government”. In this political manifesto, James assaulted Crown Colony government, arguing that it was bankrupt, discriminatory, and unrepresentative of local people at all levels. He railed against the racism, colorism, and economic oppression that undergirded the British colonial empire. He marshaled evidence about the hypocrisy of the British and those in local government, maintaining that

> [I]n the colonies any man who speaks for his country, any man who dares to question the authority of those who rule over him, any man who tries to do for his own people what Englishmen are so proud that other Englishmen have done for theirs, immediately becomes in the eyes of the colonial Englishman a dangerous person, a wild revolutionary, a man with no respect for law and order, a self-seeker actuated by the lowest motives, a

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reptile to be crushed at the first opportunity. What at home is the greatest virtue becomes in the colonies the greatest crime.\[^{54}\]

James asserted that despite the fact that Great Britain had the Caribbean under her thumb, those living in the colonies must have self-determination and freedom. He believed that despite racial propaganda to the contrary, Negroes and colored peoples could govern themselves, and the opportunity to do so was long overdue.

In the late 1930s, a Guianese living in neighboring Venezuela would echo James’ sentiments. J. P. Croal wrote an angry memorandum to what would come to be known as the Moyne Commission, a royal commission dedicated to exploring social and economic conditions in the British colonies in the Caribbean in 1938 and 1939. Referring to the independence achieved by the Iraqis from the British in 1932 and the constitutional struggle in British Guiana that resulted in the 1928 constitution, he wrote,

> Do the people of Iraq know more about the art of self-government than the people of British Guiana. I say no, a thousand times no. Then why did Great Britain, in revising the Constitution in 1927, not give the people of British Guiana a more advanced system of government by means of which the people of the colony could have had more voice in their own affairs, after 1-1/4 centuries of British rule, instead of one which would make them start all over again?

Drawing on the British ideas about “tutelage” and “backwards people,” he highlighted the hypocrisy of the British position and demanded that they decide whether they would ever allow “coloured races” the possibility of self-government:

> ...Is it that the people have not been tutored properly or [is it] the system that has lagged behind the people? I say it is the latter. Then where does the British policy of teaching backward peoples the art of self-government so that they will eventually rule themselves come in? She must define her position in this matter now or never. If the British system of jurisprudence and home rule was not intended for coloured races – or in colonies

where there is a preponderance of coloured population – of the British Empire why does she not say so.\textsuperscript{55}

He argued that Guianese were a politically astute people and had no need for training from the English:

\begin{quote}
[T]he people of British Guiana are more politically self-conscious than the people of Great Britain…politics is the one field in her assets that attracts the professional and amateur, young and old, rich and poor alike. Every Demerarian is a politician, full-fledged or embryonic. There is nothing that a Guianese has to learn from an Englishman in politics…\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

In his closing, he launched an attack on Clementi’s book, which upheld the justifications for Crown Colony government in its pages:

\begin{quote}
I cannot close without a word about Clementi’s book. It has done more harm than good, making the people of England, who read it, believe that we are a backwards people…His book is a most prejudicial and wanton attack on a people that has ever been made.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Ultimately, in British Guiana, the return to Crown Colony in 1928 literally meant a re-empowerment of the sugar industry and a disenfranchisement of the people of British Guiana, who had never been fully enfranchised to begin with—and they knew it.

\textsuperscript{55}“Summary of the Suggestions Put Forward by J.P. Croal Member (by merit) of the Academy of Political Science (Columbia University) for the Consideration of the Royal Commission Visiting the West Indian Islands,” No Date. Circa 1938. CO 950/685, National Archives of the UK, London.
\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., 5
\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., 6
CHAPTER 2 – OVERLAPPING DIASPORAS IN THE 1930S

This chapter explores the dominance of the sugar industry and its attendant impact during the Great Depression, as well as the experience and realities of plantation work life in the specific hydraulic environment of British Guiana. These issues are of central importance if we are to understand the 1935 strikes and the character of the challenges facing workers, the plantation system, and the colonial government. The chapter also highlights very different dimensions of diasporic consciousness that animated Indian and African communities in British Guiana.

King Sugar

As I demonstrated in the introduction, scholars of the Caribbean from C. L. R. James to Clive Thomas have developed a Caribbean sociology around the plantation and a long historiography of the impact of sugar-led development. Frank Moya Pons followed this tradition in his *History of the Caribbean*, where he examined the Caribbean from Columbus’ arrival to the beginning of the Great Depression.¹ Pons argued for the centrality of the sugar plantation as a defining factor in the region, which unified the Caribbean and fundamentally contributed to its development into some of the wealthiest countries and later into some of the poorest. The sugar economy dominated the development and underdevelopment in the Caribbean, the social composition of the region, and the integration of these countries into the world economy.² This remained true for British Guiana throughout the 1930s, even as the country writhed from the pangs caused by the Great Depression.

In many countries, the sugar interest exercised its tentacles of control over the colonial administration, which contributed to instability in the economies as well as uneven development. Writing in 1929, C. Y. Shepard, Professor of Economics at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad, wrote that the “sugar industry has ever been the shuttlecock of politics” in the British West Indies.³ There were fledgling efforts to add alternative agricultural elements to economies dominated by sugar – for example, bananas in Jamaica, the Winward islands, Dominica, and British Honduras; cocoa in Grenada and Trinidad; citrus in Dominica and Jamaica. However, due to competition on the world stage, natural disasters, lack of capital, preferences in place in Europe and the United States, and sugar industry dominance in politics, none of these industries were able to flourish during the first third of the century and the sugar industry managed to maintain the upper hand.⁴

The overwhelming majority of workers in British Guiana were employed on the sugar plantations. As in other Caribbean countries, efforts had been made to diversify the economy. British Guiana had rice and coconut estates and there were fledgling attempts to develop the forestry and mining industries. However, despite efforts by the governor of British Guiana and many entrepreneurs to diversify the economy, sugar maintained a dominant hold on the economy during the 1930s. An international observer wrote the following in 1938: “[T]he Colony is at present wholly dependent on Sugar.”⁵ This dominance would continue for decades. In 1953, nationalist politician Cheddi Jagan asserted, “[s]ugar has indeed played a major role in the agricultural economy of British Guiana, so much so that the history of B. G. can truly be said to

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³ C. Y. Shephard, “The Sugar Industry of the British West Indies and British Guiana with Special Reference to Trinidad” Economic Geography 5, no. 2 (April 1929):149-75.
⁵ J. D. Tyson, Report on the Condition of Indians in Jamaica, British Guiana and Trinidad (Simla: Government of India Press, 1939), 13. Tyson was sent by the government of India to British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica to assess the situation of Indians in the West Indies.
be a history of sugar.”⁶ Even as late as the 1980s, Guyanese economist Clive Thomas wrote, “[s]ugar production has been the major economic activity underlying the colonial penetration, later capitalist consolidation, and subsequent underdevelopment of the national economy of Guyana.”⁷

The 1930s brought incredible shifts and changes. Nigel Bolland argued that “colonial political culture” was challenged by Garveyism, Ethiopianism, Marxism and Fabian Socialism.⁸ Many of those who had returned from service in World War I and had participated in migration for work had been exposed to radical ideas that would make a mark on the Caribbean. There was an in-flow of migrant return to the Anglophone Caribbean from places like Cuba, Panama and Costa Rica, as opportunities in those places dried up. This contributed to unemployment in the countries of origin, which was already severe given the challenges that agricultural goods faced the world economy due to the Great Depression. Bolland described the regional impact in this way:

The economic dislocations of the Depression threatened a complete breakdown in the predominantly monocultural economies of the Caribbean, leading to social instability and political crisis. Throughout the region unemployment increased, wages and incomes declined, and the standard of living for the great majority of the population—especially agricultural workers—worsened. Even in better times most agricultural workers, who were employed only seasonally, lived in chronic insecurity and dire poverty. During the Depression the prices of many necessities increased while wages and chances of employment decreased.⁹

In British Guiana, unemployment increased, resulting in an expansion of surplus labor.

Workers complained constantly about work shortages. On the whole, the lives of the majority of

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plantation workers worsened and their pay decreased or became uneven. Those able to obtain steady employment worked harder and for longer and longer hours. Although sugar production actually increased in volume, only a few plantation managers saw bonuses.\textsuperscript{10}

In British Guiana, as in most countries during the 1930s, unemployment was high. In the 1931 census, 52.8\% of the population over the age of five were listed as having “no occupation” (an increase of 18\% from 1921), while 55\% were listed as having a definite occupation.\textsuperscript{11} Women were hardest hit. Between 1921 and 1931, there was a 36\% decline in women in the workforce.\textsuperscript{12} The top three occupations for women were listed as agriculture, representing 28.06\% of the total population over the age of five; commercial workers (merchants, shopkeepers, clerks, shop assistants, transport workers and others), listed at 9.25\%; and domestics, who represented 6.14\%.\textsuperscript{13} Women represented 33.5\% of the overall workforce, with 38\% working in agriculture and 33\% laboring as domestics.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{On the Edge of Empire: Experiencing the Sugar Plantations in British Guiana}

The vast majority of the residents of British Guiana, a colony below sea level, lived in coastal areas subject to the joint forces of flood and drought. Homes on stilts girded by deep trenches, canals, and dams testified to the volatility of the Atlantic Ocean and the many rivers that frequently and disastrously breeched the territory. This was not the azure Caribbean paradise of postcards of the romanticized New World. The waters of British Guiana mired the landscape

\textsuperscript{10} Gray to MacDonald, August 2, 1935, AC3/137, July-December 1935, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown.


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Linda Peake and D. Alissa Trotz, \textit{Gender, Ethnicity and Place: Women and Identities in Guyana} (London: Routledge, 1999), 45.
and its inhabitants in the sludge of their destructive fury. Its landscape, quite distinctive in the Caribbean, was fundamentally hydraulic.

British Guiana had been developed in the name of sugar. The country experienced two rainy seasons per year, which allowed for two annual crops of sugar as opposed to one. Sugar planters tended to be the wealthiest men in the colonies, in possession of the most fertile land. As of 1928, British Guiana reverted to Crown Colony status, which resulted in more legislative appointments for sugar industry men and deeper control for sugar interests in government. King Sugar’s entrepreneurs steered the economic, social, and physical development of the colony to their benefit, and, as many scholars have argued, this led to the mono-crop underdevelopment of a country otherwise rich in minerals and diverse agricultural and forestry resources.¹⁵

Water was simultaneously the blessing and the curse of the sugar industry. The seawall built along the coastline provided some frontline defense against the Atlantic Ocean. In addition, sugar estates were lined with a series of dams, trenches, and canals. Much of the cane was moved through canals on barges. At the front of the estates, long mounds of clay and silt formed the earthen dams designed to keep out the salt water that was damaging to agricultural efforts. Fresh water from the savannah and marshlands needed to be regulated as well through backdams. Along the sides were a series of trenches and canals designed to supply and drain fresh water from the fields. Kokers, or sluices, were guillotine-like sliding gate structures designed to control the flow of the water.¹⁶

¹⁵ During the 1930s, residents and non-sugar business entrepreneurs complained constantly about the unfair dominance of the sugar industry in politics. British Guiana dispatch documents in the 1930s are riddled with proposals and requests for government support for various alternative industries including rice, coconut, banana, forestry, diamond, and gold.

Yet all of these human-made modifications to the landscape could not always control, hold back, or even stifle the floods that dominated life in British Guiana. In 1934, serious floods ravaged the country. In Essequibo, the sugar industry literally went under water and was consumed by torrents. The devastation to land and economy led the governor to plead with sugar industry executives to provide employment in other regions to the families who lost everything.\textsuperscript{17} On the East Coast of Demerara, homes, farms, and livestock were annihilated, condemning villagers who previously experienced relative independence in their labor to complete dependence on the sugar industry—the largest employer in country—for their livelihood and survival.\textsuperscript{18}

The archives are replete with discussion of how the environment affected peoples’ lives. The Amerindians did not call this country the “Land of Many Waters” for nothing. One missionary described his experience during the rainy season by stating that he and his family were “up to our eyes in water and mud…..”\textsuperscript{19} The lack of drainage throughout the country plagued laborers and all residents, and manifested itself in extreme hardship and illness, particularly malaria.

After a night of heavy rains, women and men would have to wade through water to continue their daily activities—to go to the market, to religious institutions, to rum shops, to see friends and family, to get to work. In 1938, the Manpower Citizens’ Association (MPCA) wrote a memorandum to the Moyne Commission:

\ldots the distance from workers’ homes to work places vary from 7 miles to a few yards. Except on three plantations there is no transportation system on which workers could be

\textsuperscript{17} Northcote to MacDonald, October 21, 1935, AC3/137, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown.
\textsuperscript{18} See page 4 of \textit{Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into and Report on The Labour Disputes in Demerara and Berbice During the Months of September and October, 1935}, (Georgetown: “The Argosy” Company, 1936), CO 111/739/1, National Archives of the UK, London.
\textsuperscript{19} Burnell to Calder, June 9, 1950, CWM/CMS, Guyana Correspondence (A-W) 1941-1950, Box 1, SOAS Archives & Special Collections, London.
conveyed to and from their work places. In wet seasons the mud dams become impassable and trudging in one or two feet of mud is a harrowing experience with the result that when the destination is reached the worker is exhausted.\textsuperscript{20}

Visitors to the colony sometimes expressed unease about the conditions on the sugar plantations. They were especially disturbed, for example, by the women wading through miles of muddy water to get to work. MPCA described women’s experiences:

\begin{quote}
       [M]en and women have got to wade and cross the canals and trenches to get to their work. As the men and women proceed in their hundreds on the dams, the women, as soon as they reach their destination, will have to get into the trenches. These trenches are sometimes breast-deep and other times shallower, but in any case they have to lift their clothing before they enter and they tell the men – ‘Brothers hide your faces that we may cross.’\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

These were the conditions under which agricultural work was carried out.

In addition to the difficulties of managing the mechanisms developed to control water, sugar planting specifically was labor intensive and included multiple jobs. Cane fields and trenches needed to be weeded regularly. Prior to harvesting, cane fields were set afire to remove the leaves and straw from the stalks to simplify the process and lower labor costs. Then cane had to be cut, loaded onto punts (barges), and moved to the factory. The four stages of the sugar manufacturing process included milling, clarification (removal of dirt), water removal/evaporation, and crystallization (initiated by a process of pan-boiling).\textsuperscript{22} Then the sugar needed to be dried, weighed, packaged, transported, and delivered. Extensive human power was necessary to execute this entire process.

\textsuperscript{20} Manpower Citizen’s Association Memorandum to the Chairman of the West India Royal Commission, No Date. Circa 1938, CO 950/675, National Archives of the UK, London, 6.
\textsuperscript{21} Manpower Citizen’s Association Memorandum, 6.
Table 2. List of Plantation Jobs

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Shovel gang</th>
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<tr>
<td>Weeders</td>
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<td>Forkmen</td>
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<td>Planters</td>
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<td>Boys gang</td>
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<td>Creole gang</td>
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<tr>
<td>Punt-loaders</td>
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<td>Muleboys</td>
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<td>Cane-cutters</td>
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<td>Water cane-cutters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Factory workers</td>
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<td>Drivers</td>
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<td>Overseers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bookkeeper</td>
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<td>Plantation manager</td>
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Although women were a significant segment of the plantation workforce, it seems that in plantation culture at this time, women’s labor was seen as an extra force, similar to the labor of children. In all of the contemporary reporting on the matter—in the press, commission reports, government correspondence and other documents—plantation laborers were largely understood and marked as male. “Laborer” was used to describe a male worker. Often when women workers were actually discussed, they were referred to as “their wives.” Despite the marginal status of their labor, when women dared to withdraw it, they often suffered retaliation. If they were married, their husbands could be punished through fines and docked wages. Men certainly represented the majority of the workforce. However, women provided essential labor at multiple levels—in the sugar cane fields, in the trenches (literally), in the home (both theirs and others’),

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23 See page 45 of Peake and Trotz, *Gender, Ethnicity and Place* for a discussion on the ways in which women were pushed out of the workforce. They argue that between the mid-19th century and 1966, women became marginalized in the labor force—“women’s identities shift from being producers to reproducers.” Their research shows that in 1861, women were 46.2% of workforce, and in 1931, a total of 33.5% of workforce. By 1960, women represented 22.7% of workforce.
and rarely they even served as drivers.\footnote{There was one woman who testified in the evidence hearings about the 1935 strikes. She worked as a driver on Plantation Farm. See “Evidence of Mrs. Sarah Thomas,” Labour Disputes Commission, 1935, Evidence of Witnesses, 183-190, CO 111/739/2, National Archives of the UK, London.} Yet, it was official policy to pay women less than the men, even for the same jobs. In the historical record, it seems that plantation workers did not challenge this inequity. Even when they demanded increases, their increases included these differentials.

Despite the fact that slavery and indentured servitude had technically ended and modifications to plantation systems were made due to new technologies, the culture of labor systems developed under those institutions remained stubbornly authoritarian.\footnote{See Thomas, Plantations, 12 and 78.} In his work, \textit{Plantations, Peasants and State: A Study of the Mode of Sugar Production in Guyana}, Caribbean economist Clive Thomas argued, “slavery and indentured immigration forged a rigid, hierarchical, and authoritarian pattern of social relations on the plantations.” This included a “sharp” division of “those with authority and those without….”\footnote{Ibid., 78} Sugar cultivation demanded “a relatively large labor force, large amounts of capital for initial outlay in water-control systems, and close supervision of unskilled labor.” For this reason, Thomas noted that the industry “favored the commandist, quasi-military systems of agricultural organization that have prevailed in this industry.”\footnote{Ibid., 6.}

The plantation regime was based in rigid hierarchy and managers needed effective means to discipline a sizable labor force in order to minimize profit loss due to work slow-downs or stoppages at crucial points in the sugar harvesting process. Intimidation and abuse was an all-too-common part of plantation culture. This was particularly true during the 1930s, when sugar
prices had fallen on the world market and managers insisted on increased productivity to maintain levels of profit and sustain various estates.

Canework was back-breaking work. Poets and novelists from the Caribbean have devoted pages to describing the harshness of the labor-intensive sugarcane fields. In the excerpts below from the poem “Song of the Creole Gang Women,” David Dabydeen, acclaimed Guyanese novelist and poet, described the consuming life on the sugar estates owned by the multinational corporation Bookers through the voices of five women. 28

1st Woman
Wuk, nuttin bu wuk
Maan noon an night nuttin bu wuk
Booker own me patacake 29
Booker own me pickni. 30
Pain, nuttin bu pain
Waan million tous’ne acre cane.
O since me baan – juk! Juk! Juk! Juk! Juk!
So sun in me eye like taan
So Booker saach deep in me flesh
Kase Booker own me rass
An Booker own me cutlass --
Bu me dun cuss ... Gaad leh me na cuss no mo!

The first woman describes the monotony and pain of work in the fields, and the feeling that Bookers owned everything about her life—her children, her work tools, her very body. Since she was born, she declared, she was cutting cane, with the sun bearing down on her. Later parts of the poem read as follows:

Chorus
Dosay an mittae, dosay an mittae,
Booker put e mout on me like pirae. 31

5th Woman

29 Patacake refers to vagina.
30 Pickni refers to children.
31 Pirae refers to piranha.
Look a de sun how e fix in de sky like taskmasta eye,
A de coconut-tree dat watch over we like overseer
Treaten fo spill e load on we maiden head...
Me tust, dust an 61 ecogni choke me mout, sweat leak over me like
gutta-wata
Heat a hatch louse in me hair...\(^{32}\)

In the fifth woman’s verse, she described how the sun and the coconut trees, associated with visions of paradise (even during this period), are more like overseers – watching their every move. The heavy sweat, the dust that chokes her, the overwhelming heat, and the lice that hatch eggs in her hair, are reminders of the distress of the work, even for those who came of age working on the estates. The other thing that clearly comes through in this poem is the unspoken sexual harassment and abuse sometimes heaped on women of the canefields, who found themselves at risk from an overseer’s roving eye, a manager’s actions, and the desire of other laborers.

Women experienced particular hardships. Several of the grievances that workers had during the upheavals of 1935 were related specifically to the plight of women. Examples include that they were being “forced” to work in the heat of the fields when they were pregnant, that elderly women or “grannies” had to walk long distances, that young drivers and overseers harassed them. The testimony of the MPCA in 1938 about life in the sugar industry gives us gendered insights as well as a sympathetic look at the challenges facing overseers. The author of the piece upheld Victorian ideals about the role of men and women even while acknowledging that this ideal was not possible for laborers in the context of British Guiana. He wrote that women needed to work and were unable to “remain home and attend to their children and the fireside”\(^{33}\) because the men and boys could not earn enough to maintain the family.

\(^{33}\) Manpower Citizen’s Association Memorandum, 7-8. Fireside refers to an outdoor coalpot and set up, basically a detached outdoor kitchen created to avoid fires given that most peoples’ houses were made from wood.
He further expressed concern about the co-mingling of girls and young women with men in the gangs and the estate staff. This co-mingling, he wrote, “cannot be conducive to social and moral uplift of humanity.”\textsuperscript{34} He lambasted the existence of large numbers of “Eurasian” children, fathered by European men and Indian women, whose fathers did not take care of them, leaving the burden of childcare up to the mothers and their families. The author argued that Indian women sometimes found themselves at the mercy of European overseers and managers, men who were mostly unmarried and who were “open to all sorts of bad designs of sex.”\textsuperscript{35} Although he mentioned that sometimes women benefitted from their associations with White men, he decried the “illicit pressure” many women faced. These pressures, he argued, affected “the proper administration of the estates” and caused “social upheaval.”\textsuperscript{36} He believed that managers were the ultimate beneficiaries of the plantation system. They collected rent from the overseers, who were miserable and released their frustrations on women. He described overseers as “the unhappiest lot of Brain workers in the World. As buffers between their Bosses and the workers, they suffer mental agony, economic serfdom, and grave social disabilities which are grossly unfair to human beings to endure.” These men were known as PBOs or “Poor Bloody Overseers.” He continued, “[a]nd some of them take to drink and other habits and ruin themselves and are found on the streets of Georgetown, as sucked oranges of Sugardom and no good for service anywhere in the world.”\textsuperscript{37}

Clem Seecharan, who grew up on a plantation in British Guiana and went on to write the definitive biography of one of sugar’s key leaders (Jock Campbell, who headed the Booker

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 7-8
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 8.
Company), described a decidedly male version of cane cutting in his work, where a masculine culture was produced through labor:

The lush contact of machete on juice-saturated cane began before dawn. Soon cutters, blackened by ash, would harangue each other. Invariably this had nothing to do with work; the source of the animation was more elevated—sex, whore-houses, rum and cricket. Subtlety would have been out-of-place. The raucousness and crudity of the exchange must have helped to lighten the hard tasks, made more burdensome by bodies smeared with the sticky cane juice, ash and sweat in the remorseless heat. 38

Seecharan also gave us sweet memories of his time as a boy on the plantation where he grew up. He remembered the harvesting of cane as a time of great expectations. His reminiscences are not dissimilar to those of children from other parts of the Caribbean where cane was a ubiquitous part of life:

A consuming expectancy claimed us all as, impatiently, we awaited the burning of cane to remove the think undergrowth, the impenetrable thrash which 63ecognize the ground as cane reached twelve feet or more. The aroma of burnt cane and scalded cane-juice was seductive…The night before cane was cut, in darkness or in moonlight, our reaping of choice, juicy stalks, provided sheer bliss through many spacious hours of cane-sucking, heightening the peculiar freedom stolen by boys in the night. 39

The culture of life on the canefields was a mixed bag: to some the canefields represented sweetness and one of paradise’s treats, to others fortunes, to some stolen kisses, to others terror and night sweats, and to an overwhelming many, grueling and back-breaking work under a wrathful sun.

Many of the jobs and living arrangements of the plantation sector were segmented along racial lines. According to Seecharan, descendants of Africans were often seasonal task-gang cane-cutters and factory workers who tended not to live on the estates, while many Indians were

39 Ibid., 8-9.
still tied to estates.\textsuperscript{40} Indentured servitude in British Guiana had only officially ended in 1917 (with the last indentures arriving in 1921), less than two decades prior to 1935. Africans complained that they did not live rent-free or have access to “free” medical care and therefore the fluctuations and overall decline in their payments were devastating to their families. In addition, generally this group did not receive drainage nor irrigation support to protect their homes and land. Those who lived on the plantations often had access to varying degrees of medical care and many did not pay rent for their housing. However, housing was often substandard. The MCPA described some of the housing on the estates: “The barrack system of 10’ x 12’ (with few exceptions) dimension[,] the majority of which are of mud floor with one window and a plain zinc roof[,] are a disgrace to a British Colony.”\textsuperscript{41} Further, workers living on estates were subject to harsh and quick reprisals in response to resistance or articulation of grievances. These realities reflected the differing positions of Africans and Indians in the sugar industry as well as their isolation from each other in this period.

Workers also had access to different levels of protections. Indian laborers theoretically could level complaints against the estates to the Immigration Agents. In 1935, Governor Geoffrey Northcote of British Guiana described the labor situation with respect to the sugar industry in the following way:

> The various sugar estates provide the principal form of employment in this Colony.... Up to the present the only provisions are contained in the immigration laws under which the Immigration Agents are required to protect the interest and investigate complaints of East Indian immigrant labour. Other labour consists of persons of African descent who live on their own lands adjacent to the estates and have been considered capable, as entirely free agents, of safeguarding their own interests.\textsuperscript{42}

Despite the paternalistic implication in the above quote that Indians were not considered capable

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{41} MPCA Memorandum, 13.
\textsuperscript{42} Northcote to Thomas, January 6, 1935, AC3/139, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown.
of advocating for themselves, as a matter of colonial policy, Blacks had no such intermediary and were left to fend for themselves. Northcote did not mention in this correspondence that the office of Immigration Agent had been discontinued in 1932, and that their duties had been assigned to District Commissioners, which actually resulted in less representation. However, there were several examples of emissaries from India being sent to British Guiana to investigate the experiences of Indians. Their job was to assess conditions, make recommendations, and advocate on behalf of people of Indian heritage with the local government of British Guiana, the Colonial Office, the government of India, and the British Crown itself. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Indians had developed a number of religious and political institutions through which they advocated for themselves.

The African-descended population had a longer tenure in British Guiana, and dominated the lower echelons of the civil service, which could feasibly provide access to channels for grievances. Africans too created local institutions, including newspapers and churches, where they could voice their concerns. Finally, as the archival record shows, they also made direct appeals to the governor, the Colonial Office, and His Majesty seeking justice and remedy of wrongs.

Although they existed, unions did not have bargaining power, nor even the right to enter the estates, so neither Indians nor Blacks had local institutions that could truly defend their interests as laborers collectively.
Testimony From the Grassroots

Estate officials classified sugar workers into three groupings: residents, villagers, and pasture laborers. These distinctions matter if we are to begin to unravel the dynamics of the rebellions that I in British Guiana in 1935. Joseph Pembleton was one of few resident estate workers who testified before the commission set up to investigate the disturbances of 1935. Commissioners had tremendous difficulty obtaining testimonies from resident laborers because they were afraid of reprisal. Pembleton chose to come forward. He stated, “Many people are talking about different things happening to them but they are afraid to come and speak. I am prepared to come and speak the truth.” Through his testimony, we learn firsthand about the experiences of resident workers and what it meant for them to take a stand.

Pembleton lived with his wife and mother in what he described as “a dirt house” with two rooms on Plantation Lusignan, one of the more modern estates. Lusignan had newer-style single-family housing for residents, a creche for children, and an artesian well, and was one of three estates in the country to have a railway. Reportedly, before the railway, many workers travelled by foot five and a half miles each way to work. The railway shortened workers’ travel time to work dramatically. The estate also paid sea defense, water rates, irrigation, and drainage costs for all residents.

Despite these improvements, life at Lusignan Plantation was a daily reminder of residents’ lack of autonomy. Pembleton’s testimony demonstrated the precarious nature of

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43 Please see Table 3 in Chapter Three for an explanation of these categories.
44 Laborers who lived on plantation grounds.
45 The governor established a commission to explore the causes of the rebellions and make recommendations. The testimonies hail from the evidence collected for the commission.
46 Report of the Commissioners, 16.
existence for resident estate workers. If a resident received a directive that he did not obey, often there were consequences. For example, if the driver gave an order to clean the front or back of his house, “[i]f it is not done, our money is stopped.” His pay would be docked for disobeying orders whether he showed up to work in the fields or not.

When Pembleton testified before the commission, he had already been evicted from his home for participating in the strikes. He worked in the cane cutting gang. On the day the strikes began, they had been cutting cane as usual. They started by cutting the dam bed first, but then the overseer came and told them what the overall price would be. “Many times,” Pembleton stated, “the price does not suit us but as we are on the work we have to continue to finish the work.” He described the stakes for not working: “As we are living on the estate and they compel us[,] if we don’t work they would put us off the estate, we work on the bed that day but did not work the whole day because we were disgust over the price.” He described several moments where “everybody was determined to go away.”

However, during what Pembleton described as “the time of the strike,” the workers stopped working when they were given an unsatisfactory price. Pembleton stated that prior to striking, workers asked for higher wages: “Every day we used to complain to the overseer and also to the manager, but they said they can’t give more.” Finally, he and others refused to keep working. After the strike began, the driver went to him and asked directly whether he was going to take on more work. He replied, “[n]o, not if they don’t give me more money because I can’t give away my labour.”

After the strikes ended, Pembleton—who had lived on Plantation Lusignan for six years—was summoned to the manager’s office. There, the acting manager, listed as Mr.

50 Ibid., 719-721.
Belgrave, told him he had 14 days to vacate the premises. According to Pembleton, Belgrave demanded, “[w]ell Pembleton 14 days after to-day I want the house.” Pembleton accepted the order but later returned to ask why. The acting manager responded, giving him unsolicited advice:

Pembleton, we have no reasons, but the conditions of the estate does not suit you; you should be working somewhere in the goldfields. The more you get the more you want and Mr. McKenzie give me authority to serve you notice.

Pembleton believed he was evicted for participating in the strikes.51

During his tenure at Lusignan, Pembleton had developed a small garden and created fortifications to protect his home. He testified, “I bought boards and board it and fence the place for my convenience. I fetch dirt to build a gallery high so that the water should not go inside.” He cited these renovations to his home because he felt that they compounded the injustice of his eviction.

Pembleton also sustained an injury during his time on the plantation while combatting a fire. His story about the fire sheds light on the experience of resident workers:

The building catch fire one night and they rang the bell, and it is the rule that you must go and assist to put out the fire. I went to assist in putting out the fire and on the Sunday, I got pain.52

After the fire, he could no longer do certain plantation jobs. He was convinced that due to his injuries, plantation staff unfairly barred him from receiving provision or rice lands, one of the expectations of the moral economy of resident labor life. Pembleton’s story exposed the hazardous nature of sugar estate work and life’s uncertainties during this time period. Injuries sustained on the job did not provoke disability or insurance payments—they simply meant that

51 Ibid., 724.
52 Ibid., 728.
the person injured would endure a lower quality of life and losses of income, sometimes for the remainder of his or her existence.

Pembleton’s story further revealed that resident laborers were expected to do what they were told. If the bell rang, they were expected to put out fires. If other workers were on strike, they were expected to go and take on their work. Sometimes residents were subject to arbitrary decisions that affected not only their livelihoods, but their homes and ability to feed themselves. Prevailing estate staff wisdom saw resident labor as the group of workers tied to the estate and beholden to do whatever was asked of them irrespective of whether or how much they were paid. One manager described it unabashedly as a throwback from the indenture system. 53 By participating in the rebellions, resident laborers fundamentally questioned the heart of this arrangement. While soliciting testimony, one examiner, Diaz, presumably a Sugar Producers’ Association member, also displayed this estate logic when he asked Pembleton about his statements:

You have made reference more than once to “we are compelled to work for the estate.” Do you agree that if you work on the estate, and you get a free home and hospital free, you should work for the estate when you are well enough to do so?

Pembleton adamantly replied, “I agree to work for the estate at any time provided the price paid me is reasonable.” 54

Pembleton had the reputation of being a troublemaker among plantation staff. During his testimony, the Chairman asked him, “[h]ave you the reputation on the estate of being a troublesome man with your fellow workers, making rows, and you fought a woman the other day?” Pembleton replied he was peaceful and that he liked to “make sport” with everyone. In response to the allegations about the fight, he claimed that he and a woman had “a story”

53 “Evidence of Mr. Reginald Hubert Payne,” 66.
54 “Evidence of Joseph Pembleton,” 734.
(disagreement). He complained to the manager three times, but the manager simply threatened to remove both parties if they continued to have disputes. Pembleton continued, “[i]t happened that we quarreled and the woman collared me and I gave her a slap and we came to court.”

This ongoing struggle and eventual physical altercation is an example of the personal struggles between workers themselves. Ever so often, there were newspaper articles about fights between workers, physical attacks with cutlasses, people found murdered in trenches, and robberies, highlighting the violence that undergirded plantation life and life in the colony more broadly. In Pembleton’s version of the story, a nameless woman was the aggressor, but women were often particular targets of violence.\textsuperscript{55}

John Graham, another striker, was a carpenter who worked occasionally as a laborer on Plantation Lusignan. Graham’s testimony gives us a window into the criminalization of strike actions. Graham had been working at Lusignan for five years and was 37 years old. He resided in Buxton village with his wife and three children; the firstborn was 14 years old. Graham was part of one of the gangs that requested more money for cutting cane. He described the cane as extra heavy and extremely onerous.\textsuperscript{56}

Graham and others followed the manager from Lusignan to Mon Repos but he recognized that if he spoke up about the wages, it could mean trouble for him and his family. Graham stated that “[w]henever a man says anything he goes as the ringleader.” When the commission chairman asked what he meant by that, he stated, “[t]he estate generally, if you talk anything, catch you and summon you whether you are right or wrong.” The day after the workers complained about the price and stopped working, the manager paid to have him and several

\textsuperscript{55} See Chapter 7 “Beautiful Woman Without a Nose,” in Gaiutra Bahadur, \textit{Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014) for a discussion of late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century violence against Indian women on plantations.

canecutters from Buxton summoned. The workers asked management to drop the cases, but they were told that cases would not be dropped until they went back to work. Graham refused to return to work, arguing, “[t]he price was so bad-minded that I didn’t work.” After much discussion about the pricing, the commissioners directly asked him about the disturbances. He stated that everyone was peaceful and quiet.

Chairman: You mean to tell us you did not see people marching about the estate making a noise and disorderly?

Graham: No sir.

Chairman: We are inclined not to believe you on that. You may correct it now if you like.

Henderson [Commissioner]: Weren’t there bands with drums amongst that crowd?

Graham: No sir, I have not got a drum.  

Graham’s response was a deflective one, probably calculated to avoid further direct questions about the strikes. Every single witness that testified from Plantation Lusignan contradicted his testimony about the lack of commotion. He was most likely forced to testify and wanted to disassociate himself from any perception of being a “ringleader” or even a participant in the rebellions.

Strike participation could lead to fines or jail time, and some workers found creative means to avoid testifying. For example, it seems that two workers called before the commission, Owerdoram and Ramotar, claimed to be unable to speak English. County Inspector Nicole was called to the stand immediately after they testified and he confirmed that they had spoken to him in English before they were called to testify.  

57 “Evidence of John Graham,” 748.
One worker who volunteered to come forward was actually a driver, James Ganga. He had been fired shortly after the strikes, but wanted to have his say. He testified that “plenty people” were involved in the strike. His explanation for their involvement follows:

The laboring classes are guided by the driver. A certain class of overseers will do things that the authorities don’t order and the authorities don’t know….The laboring classes haven’t the knowledge to understand things and little things grow until they get to big ones.

Although not far removed from a field hand himself, Ganga made a common argument about laboring classes, one which highlighted their ignorance and lack of understanding. Ganga stated that he advocated for the workers, informing management that the work was “very hard” but that their response was simply to “[g]ive them little more.” Ganga advised the workers not to “make any disturbance,” but as the next chapter will show, they did not heed his advice.59

“Hand in Hand”: Connections to India

During the 1930s, Indians and Africans would exhibit an expanding racial and diasporic consciousness that would inform their efforts to advocate for themselves. In 1929, Indian nationalist Mahatma Gandhi sent an emissary to British Guiana to investigate the reality of the lives of East Indians and to explore the possibility of a Colonization Scheme.60 The representative, Charles Freer Andrews, visited British Guiana for three months.61 With the backing of Gandhi and his local hosts, the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA), Andrews was instantly popular with East Indian masses in British Guiana, who saw him as a representative of their homeland. Throughout his visit, he had extraordinary access to


60 In the 1920s, Lionel Luckhoo, an Indian Guianese barrister proposed a new Indian colony in British Guiana. This proposal, despite opposition from within and outside of Indian communities in British Guiana, maintained traction in the early 1930s.

61 Andrews was an ardent nationalist and a confidant of Mahatma Gandhi. As a missionary who was fluent in Hindi, he worked extensively in Indian communities in India, London and South Africa. He also traveled widely throughout Asia.
communities in British Guiana. He spoke to delegations of hundreds at open-air forums, organizational gatherings, and religious ceremonies and institutions. He attended parades, cricket matches, and performances. Sugar estate owners and government officials welcomed him and took him on various tours. He visited people on the estates and in the countryside, and lines of people came to his temporary residence in Georgetown to garner his support to solve their problems. One man, who was plagued with malaria and other illnesses, walked for 11 days to obtain a meeting with this emissary of Gandhi.  

Andrews’ assessment, recently re-published by Indian-Guyanese scholar Basdeo Mangru, is a valuable window into East Indian life in British Guiana on the eve of the 1930s. He listened to people intently, and while at times he was cautious about giving his opinion because of the complexities he witnessed, at other times, he became a forceful advocate against injustice facing East Indians and against what he viewed as evils and pitfalls within the community. There are three main points of analysis from his report that are relevant for the purposes of this chapter: connections to India, education, and conditions on the sugar estates.

East Indians expressed a deep desire to maintain connections to India. Andrews received multiple requests for a “cheap steamer service” to facilitate travel back and forth. They requested access to religious teachers from India, particularly for Hindu religious education. They highlighted the need for language teaching to preserve not only Hindi, but also Urdu. One leader spoke to him earnestly about “the loss of the mother tongue.” He concluded,  

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63 Ibid., 31.
64 Marriage was a significant concern for Hindu and Muslim East Indian leaders who argued for the recognition of Hindu and Muslim marriages without registration with the state. Some authors argue that this desire was part of Indian men’s desire to reassert patriarchy. The other issue that was raised throughout Andrews’ writing was about the need to raise the marriage age to 14. This was accomplished before he left as Hindu leaders throughout the colony met and voted on the issue.
For merely to let badly spoken English take the place of Hindi, with all of its religious associations and traditions, would be the worst fate of all.\(^{65}\)

This sentiment was echoed by Indian-Guianese columnist Sabib Hafiz Khan in the *New Daily Chronicle* in 1935:

Adding to the schools Curriculum I think should be the teaching of Hindi: Teaching of Hindi in schools for East Indians should be made compulsory. Through not being properly educated in our mother tongue we are ignorant of many things we should know of our race. It is essential that every East Indian be able to read or speak his native language.\(^{66}\)

Indian Guianese also expressed deep concern about education. Primary school was compulsory in the colony and the overwhelming majority of the schools were mission schools supported by government funds. Although Andrews was trained as a missionary, he saw this as “a serious breach of religious neutrality.”\(^ {67}\) Hindu and Muslim (then called Muhammadan) Indian-Guianese registered their strong apprehensions about the Christianization of their children. This was such a significant issue that some parents opted to keep their children out of school. Although there was a “consciousness clause” that allowed children to opt out of singing Christian hymns or participating in prayers, parents vented that when their children asserted this clause, they were shamed or made to sit alone.\(^ {68}\) Andrews identified the shortage of East Indian teachers and discriminatory practice against non-Christian teacher applicants as barriers to education for East Indian children. He also commented on the Oxford and Cambridge exams for which British Guianese students were being prepared. He believed that the education children received was not relevant to them, that it was unconnected to their lives in British Guiana and centered around Great Britain, a place many of them would never see. He felt that the exams “have no touch with life out here at all…. [T]he student loses sight of his own country and

\(^{67}\) Andrews and Basdeo Mangru, *Impressions of British Guiana*, 77.
\(^{68}\) Ibid., 77.
upbringing altogether. He memorizes facts which have practically no relation to his own personal life.” 69 Andrews also stated,

What has to be surgically amputated is this false teaching, in which an exotic British pride is being cultivated without any roots in the soil. It naturally produces the mere weeds of false imitation or parasitism, and leads to no growth at all. 70

Ultimately, Andrews believed that the system of education was failing not only East Indian children, but African Guianese children as well.

During the evening we watched a glorious sunset, and throughout the day, I noticed again and again the amazing beauty of the sky and also the beautiful green of the countryside at this time of year. It is not difficult to see how impressive this beauty might be, if only the natural habits of the Indian and Negro children were cultivated, instead of being crippled by education. 71

A third area that commanded much of Andrews’ attention was the conditions on the sugar estates. Despite his warm welcome from members of the sugar industry, Andrews did not withhold criticism. He felt the housing and health conditions on many estates were abominable:

I have seen, in different visits, the quarters of labourers who have emigrated from India in almost every place in the world; but I do not think I have ever seen anything quite so bad as these old “ranges” for the labourers in British Guiana. The managers, whom I have already met, are obviously ashamed of these ranges, but they call themselves helpless. 72

In another passage, he continued his critique:

Some of them must be nearly 50 years old; and the filth that has been continually thrown outside the door (where no drain exists at all) must have accumulated in such thick layers that the ground in front of the lines was almost like a cesspit. There has never been the slightest attempt at any drainage. How any sanitary inspector could possibly have allowed such a state of things to go on passes my comprehension! The buildings themselves were in a dilapidated condition. In some cases, the floor was made entirely of mud and there had been no attempt whatever to raise the building above the level of the mud outside. Such buildings, in a malarial district, are nothing less than death traps.

69 Ibid., 62.
70 Ibid., 98.
71 Ibid., 71.
72 Ibid., 47
Both the companies and the Government are to blame for allowing such habitations to go on, even through the years of prosperity in the sugar industry. Of all the countries I have ever visited, I have never seen anything so bad in this direction, as what I have witnessed in British Guiana.73

In Andrews’ estimation, the sugar industry in British Guiana was “behind-hand” and could not compete on the world market. “I cannot see much future before them,” he wrote, “unless a considerable amount of capital is invested for new and healthy homes for the East Indian labourers.” He felt that the industry was also hampered by the “water-logged soil with a ditch every few yards and the sugar cane collected in boats along a canal.”74 Finally, he recognized the influence of the sugar industry in politics and argued that it “drags down, with its weight, the present Administration.”75

Laborers spoke to him extensively about challenges of survival in British Guiana. They mentioned, for example, that they did not have enough access to rice and provision lands to supplement their meager incomes from the sugar estates. Some spoke longingly about wanting to return to India, believing that conditions were better there, and wanting to ensure that they did not die in British Guiana, because “it was better to die in India than to die in Demerara.”76 Despite the conditions on the estates and the poverty that Andrews witnessed in Georgetown, he actively discouraged repatriation. His consistently responded,

…it is true that the low sugar prices have for the present made things somewhat bad here, nevertheless, in India itself the living conditions were on the whole even worse….77

Despite his sensitivity and sympathy for the plight of East Indians, especially the poorer segments of the population, he did not escape the perils of Westernization in his assessment and,

73 Ibid., 69.
74 Ibid., 70.
75 Ibid., 102.
76 Ibid., 43.
77 Ibid., 43.
frankly, sometimes judgment of communities in British Guiana. Indians in India proved to be the standard against which East Indian morals and values in British Guiana were judged. In alignment with European beliefs that stretched back centuries before his birth, he bemoaned the ways in which life in this tropical “wild” led to moral degeneration and loss of culture. He preached against the drift towards city life in Georgetown as leading to “moral backwardness” and separating East Indians from their heritage of cultivating land. He and East Indian religious leaders discussed the perils of liquor in British Guiana incessantly.\(^7^8\)

Yet Andrews’ observations about a well-entrenched, diasporic longing for connection to India, and a simultaneous desire for better conditions on the ground in British Guiana, were trenchant. Throughout the 1930s, a rich series of visitors from India were chronicled in British Guiana newspapers. They would often be asked to give speeches. One such visitor, Annie Voehlo, advised East Indian girls to maintain their “national identity” in their dress and actions.\(^7^9\)

There were also those who took journeys in the opposite direction, to India. The physician Jung Bahadur Singh, who also served as the president of the British Guiana East Indian Association, took multiple trips (35-day journeys by ship to Calcutta) and gave report-backs about life in the mother country. Well-respected, Singh was called upon often to support with mediation during the strikes in 1935. In one of his speeches, he expressed gratitude to the Indian National Congress for “putting the spirit of independence into the hearts of every Indian.” He credited Gandhi with “awakening” the souls of Indians everywhere.\(^8^0\)

\(^7^8\) On the issue of alcohol, Andrews compared Indians in India to East Indians in British Guiana multiple times: “…strong liquor drinking has been practically unknown in these Indian villages in India, yet in Demerara it has become almost universal.” Andrews and Basdeo Mangru, *Impressions of British Guiana*, 89.


Indian unity was a matter of frequent discussion throughout this period as well. One writer, C. E. J. Ramcharicar, argued for unity with Indians in India, and among Indian-Guianese. He also advocated for education about India throughout the colony: “India’s doings and the doings of its people are magnified and we want people to know of the good of our race.” Finally, given the East Indian’s role as “pioneer” in British Guiana, he advocated an East Indian holiday recognized by the government: “We want an ‘East Indian Day’ when people from the various branches of our race may meet together, hand in hand, with heart and soul together, to make provident plans whereby our community may benefit.”

Daughters of Africa, Sons of Ethiopia

1934 and 1935 were watershed years for Black consciousness. 1934 marked the centenary of emancipation from slavery in the British Caribbean. Descendants of Africans throughout the colonies held celebrations that varied greatly in political tone and participation. Even after 1934, residents used the occasion of the centennial to pay tribute to those who endured slavery, to assess the needs of the Black population, and as a flashpoint to raise the racial issues of the day. This commemoration of Black freedom figured centrally in the emerging ideologies and activism.

As part of their efforts to “memorialize fittingly” the Centenary, the Negro Progress Convention (NPC), which boasted 5,000 members across the country, launched its Local Tuskegee in 1935. Named after Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, they envisioned the Local Tuskegee as a mechanism of self-help dedicated to solving “the economic

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82 Slavery officially ended in 1838 with the end of the Apprenticeship period, but the Slavery Abolition Act, signed in 1833, became effective January 1, 1834.
problems of our beloved country and a lasting memorial to our departed Founder President Edmund Fitzgerald Fredericks.”

The NPC had spent considerable energies to pay for tuition, room, and board for two Guianese students to attend Tuskegee Institute “for the good of the Negro People of the Colony.” In 1935, the “Tuskegee twins” returned to British Guiana. Vesta Lowe was expected to start a program for girls in Home Economics at the Assembly Hall in Georgetown, including preparation of foods, clothing, “house-wifery,” and home-crafts as well as relevant academic subjects. James Kidney would be responsible for creating a program in New Canaan for boys who were “possessed of the pioneering spirit” to learn a trade and agricultural skills.

Excited about the development of the Local Tuskegee, one member exclaimed,

With the eye of faith I look into glory-land and there I see Toussaint L’Overture, Fred Douglas [sic], Booker T. Washington and Edmund Fitzgerald Fredericks [founder of the Negro Progress Convention], and as I listen methinks I hear them saying to us “Carry on, Carry on:”

Let us then my brethren like Nehemiah of old[,] place one hand upon our sword and march on singing as we go:- We shall not cease from mental strife Nor shall our swords sleep in our hands Till we have built Tuskegee in Canaan’s green and pleasant land.

The speaker placed Toussaint L’Overture, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Edmund Fitzgerald in an African diasporic collective with representation from the “New World” side of the Atlantic: an independent Haiti, Africans in North America, and African-Guianese in South America. The speaker also connected the Biblical Canaan, “land flowing with milk and honey,” with the Guianese village of New Canaan, where Booker T. Washington’s Caribbean sister institute was to be located. For many in British Guiana at this time, agriculture and

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83 “Governor's Sympathetic Message to the Negro Progress Convention” (Continuation), New Daily Chronicle, August 3, 1935.
85 “Governor's Sympathetic Message to the Negro Progress Convention” (Continuation), New Daily Chronicle, August 3, 1935.
education were the twin fixes for the Colony, and for the NPC, they explicitly envisioned the new institute to be the most significant development for African descendants in the colony since emancipation.86

Given Booker T. Washington’s complex legacy in the United States and the reality that many still regard him as a conservative thinker with respect to race and racial equality, one might ask why his vision resonated with African Guianese such that they would go to such lengths to raise money to send students to Tuskegee for four years and expend significant energy and resources to create a local version of the Institute. However, the example of the Local Tuskegee demonstrates what happens when particular visions are transported to a different context. Washington’s focus on rural and economic development resonated in British Guiana, where so many people were living in villages and sugar plantations were the dominant employer. His focus on self-help was part and parcel of the mission of the NPC. Finally, to use land to benefit Black communities in a colonial context that was still heavily extractive was of critical importance.

1935 also unfolded as a year of diasporic contradictions on the other side of the Atlantic, in the “fatherland” itself. In response to the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy, an article appeared in the New Daily Chronicle entitled “Ethiopia My Fatherland.” The author, H. Vincent Clark, an African-Guianese, highlighted the need to defend Ethiopia and connected it to emancipation from slavery in the British Colonies.

Just a year ago we enthusiastically commemorated the Centenary of Negro Emancipation. At that time[,] I wrote on ‘The Birth Of the New Negro’ stressing our need for the development of greater race consciousness and race love[,] the casting off of inferiority

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86 At this time, undergraduate education was not a possibility within British Guiana or the larger Anglophone Caribbean. Only Trinidad boasted the Imperial College of Agriculture. Those who pursued education past the high school level had to travel to the United Kingdom, the United States, or other parts of the globe. Local Tuskegee in British Guiana was not envisioned as a university; it was essentially two gendered projects: a vocational program to help young Black men gain agricultural skills, and a center for young Black girls to learn domestic science.
complex and co-operation in the great necessary drive towards race rehabilitation.

He proceeded to lament and deride the excruciating incongruity of that critical moment:

Last year marked the centenary of Negro liberation – This year sees Ethiopia our fatherland being harassed by a European power and practically at the mercy of a European tribunal. . . . It is, however, gratifying to note that the Black Emperor has with Solomonic wisdom so conducted his side of the dispute that he has thus far not only reawakened the pride of the Fatherland in the heart of every self-conscious son of Ethiopia but has at the same time undoubtedly commanded the admiration and respect of the World’s leading diplomats. 87

Italy, Clark postulated, was offering “civilization or annihilation.” Clark argued that civilization should not be measured by “commercialism,” but by “godliness” — by “its degree of conformity to Love, Truth, and justice those principles of true Godliness so well established by the Greatest of all Civilisers Christ…. We have been in European civilization and automatically think it is better, but that is due to ignorance. Ethiopia is our fatherland and we need to defend it.”

Here Clark was drawing on the language of Ethiopianism that swept the African Diaspora in the 1920s and 30s. He connected the centenary of emancipation in the Caribbean to the invasion of Ethiopia. Clark also highlighted the ways in which African-Guianese saw themselves as Western and connected to “European civilization” but he revised the meaning of civilization to be about how a society embodied love, truth and justice. And for him, “civilization,” framed as a platform for love, truth, and justice, was echoed far more in Ethiopia than in Italy. 88 He challenged the idea that European civilization was somehow better, suggesting that the heart of Western civilization was commerce.

87 H. Vincent Clark, “Ethiopia My Fatherland,” New Daily Chronicle, August 8, 1935 (emphasis added). The title of this chapter comes from this article.
The Italy-Abyssinia crisis was a lightning rod for descendants of Africans across the world. Ethiopia came to symbolize a Black world under siege, reverberating with significant religious overtones. Throughout the Americas and globally, support groups for Ethiopia burgeoned, and British Guiana was no exception. The *New Daily Chronicle*, owned by African-Guianese labor leader and Town Council member A. A. Thorne, provided almost daily coverage of the situation in Ethiopia, as did the more conservative *Daily Argosy*. In one article, Thorne printed a quote from Trinidadian scholar-activist C. L. R. James: “Ethiopians should devastate their country by fire rather than submit to Italian domination.”

Another newspaper, the *Daily Chronicle* in Georgetown, published an article documenting the Ethiopian Empress Menen’s appeal to women to call for peace and to fight against “useless bloodshed.” Women of British Guiana responded by raising funds to provide for victims of the war. Expanding themselves beyond Ethiopia and calling themselves a “[c]onvention of daughters of Africa,” they expressed sympathy with the people of Ethiopia, praying that “God will defend and deliver her land from the terrors of the invader.” They condemned the “rapacity and greed of Italy” and the use of gas and bombs that resulted in the killing of “even women and children.”

African-Guianese Norman Cameron’s two volume series, *The Evolution of the Negro*, released for the Centenary, was advertised in the newspapers in 1935 as “doubly interesting in the light of the Italo-Abyssinia dispute.” Black Guianese angrily criticized Italy and the lackadaisical response from the British Government and the rest of Europe. Two organizations sent resolutions to King George V. The British Guiana branches of Marcus Garvey’s United

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91 “British Guiana Women to Raise Red Cross Fund for Ethiopia,” *Daily Chronicle*, October 20, 1935 (emphasis added). Part of the title of this section comes from this quote.
Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and African Communities League wrote a resolution offering to organize contingents of people of African descent to go and fight for Ethiopia.93

Another organization, the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU), held roving meetings about the Italian-Ethiopian conflict and the unemployment in the Colony. The BGLU would play a decisive role in the 1935 rebellions. At one meeting attended by 600 people, members of the BGLU drafted a resolution that affirmed their organization’s “loyalty to the British Throne and Government and its abiding faith in the inherent sense of justice and fair play of the great English people.”

They expressed their approval of Great Britain’s economic sanctions against Italy but argued that this measure did not go far enough:

…the predominating feeling of working-people in this portion of the Empire is that economic sanctions will be incomplete without the persuasion of military sanctions, and we believe that we interpret the considered opinion of the millions of working-people in these parts that further pressure be brought to bear by Britain against Mussolini, the tyrant of Italy, if necessary by military action, to restrain him in his march of aggression against the noble Ethiopian nation, and that the embargo against the exportation of arms to Ethiopia be removed so that she can obtain adequate means to defend herself.

This was followed by a suggestion to reignite the West India Regiment that fought in the Great War to “join the noble Ethiopian nation in her struggle of death against the minions of Rome.”

Finally, they implored

That the attention of the British Government be drawn to the fact that the seventy-five per cent of coloured peoples of the British Empire look on with ‘dreadful curiosity’ at the spectacle of Europe in her attitude toward their brethren in Ethiopia as the last members of an ancient, and Britain in relation to the rest of Europe.94

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94 Northcote to MacDonald, October 23, 1935, AC3/138, January-December 1935, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown. The confidential dispatch noted that the resolution was developed at a BGLU meeting held on October 10, 1935.
Both resolutions simultaneously affirmed loyalty to the Crown and upheld the independence of Ethiopia. They made claims on the British government as British Imperial subjects. They recited British propaganda about Great Britain itself highlighting ideals of “justice,” “fair play,” and greatness. Both statements advocated military intervention in favor of Ethiopia and offered soldiers from the West Indies. The idea of self-defense was also critical in both pieces—they articulated the need to support Ethiopia to defend herself. The BGLU piece overtly mentioned working people and people of color. They asserted that the majority of the Empire was appalled by Italian aggression and asserted that they were paying attention to how Europe responded to this crisis, and whether the League of Nations’ affirmation of self-determination applied to Africa. Although neither organization mentioned independence for the West Indies in these documents, by 1935 both had already affirmed the right to self-determination for the West Indies.

At this time, the BGLU was the most significant and oldest labor organization in British Guiana. Hubert Critchlow, the lead organizer of the BGLU, had also organized one of the first efforts to bring labor together across the West Indies in 1927. Labor luminaries from the British Caribbean attended. At that meeting, they promoted ideas for the West Indian Federation under which the West Indies would gain independence as a single unit while proposing a vision for the working people of the Caribbean.95

This issue of sovereignty embodied by this crisis in Ethiopia was critical for colonized people in the British Caribbean and across the Black Atlantic. Defending Abyssinia, the last, the only uncolonized African nation, against Italian domination took on the weight of centuries of Black struggle. On the heels of emancipation celebrations in British Guiana and the formation of

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95 This is a fundamentally different vision from the state-led version of the West Indies federation that emerged in the late 1950s. Ashton Chase, A History of Trade Unionism in Guyana, 1900-1961 (Demerara: New Guyana Company, Ltd, 1966), see Part II, Chapter 4.
a Local Tuskegee, the invasion represented a type of re-enslavement happening on the ancestral continent at the hands of Europe, and highlighted the racialized labor exploitation of people of African descent at home.

**Conclusion**

In the 1930s, the largest employer in British Guiana was the sugar industry. Its dominance in the Guianese economy caused dramatic upheavals with the decline of sugar prices on the world market. Indians and Africans, the laboring populations on the sugar estates, felt the pangs of the Great Depression acutely. It is important to note that Africans and Indians had different labor histories and histories of racialization in British Guiana. There were differences in tenure; segmented jobs and residencies; differing access to labor protections, land, housing, healthcare, and civil service jobs; differences, in many cases, in religion; in some cases differences in language; and differing relationships to the colonial state. Despite these differences, Africans and Indians shared an experience on sugar plantations that did not allow them to lead sustainable lives and that ate away at their dignity, particularly in an ecological landscape that lay below sea level and was subject to dramatic alternating bouts of heat and flooding.

British Guianese were active participants in the milieu of the 1930s, creating their own histories and versions of what was also occurring in other parts of the world.\(^{96}\) Globally, the 1930s was a moment pregnant with labor, anticolonial, and racial justice struggles. African Guianese ushered in an invigorated racial consciousness and, on the heels of the centennial of emancipation, they were building connections across the diaspora and beyond. Some Guianese

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\(^{96}\) Indians and Africans in British Guiana were also beginning to write their own histories of Caribbean experience. By 1930, Peter Ruhomon had already started to pen his work that would eventually be published as *Centenary History of the East Indians in British Guiana, 1838 – 1938*. In 1931, A. R. F. Webber published the *Centenary History and Handbook of British Guiana*, one of the earliest attempts to write the history of British Guiana without centering the planter class. Norman Cameron’s volumes, *The Evolution of the Negro*, were published in 1934.
embraced Garveyism and Ethiopianism as their connections to blackness and Africa while others embraced a Local Tuskegee as the path to Black liberation. The resolutions developed by the UNIA and members of the British Guiana Labour Union demonstrated their desire to register their protest against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The historical record often traces the actions of transnational actors who physically crisscross the globe and those living in the metropole, but these workers were transnational actors who were fundamentally local. They expressed solidarity with contemporary international struggles, particularly those in Ethiopia in 1935. In this scenario, those at the bottom of the British Empire articulated an anticolonial stance from within that empire, using their identity as British subjects to make claims on the British crown.

In 1935, Indian Guianese were three years away from the centenary of their arrival in British Guiana. Although they were continuously perceived as immigrant, by 1935 the overwhelming majority were born in British Guiana and spoke English. Indian Guianese continued to have ties to India. Luminaries and bureaucrats from India interested in the developing new colony of Indians in British Guiana and the welfare of Indians overseas visited the colony throughout the 1930s. Locally, Indians were expressing their desire to retain Indian languages, especially Hindi, but also Urdu. Members of the Hindu community requested spiritual leaders from India to support them to maintain Hindu teachings and rituals and pass them on to their children. They articulated the need for a low-cost steamship option to facilitate travel between India and British Guiana. Indian-Guianese were animated by the anti-colonial struggle in India, and particularly moved by Mahatma Gandhi. The majority of Indians in British Guiana maintained an anticolonial stance towards the British in India even as they were British subjects at home. The diasporic struggle for Indians in British Guiana during the 1930s was a struggle to
maintain ties with India while simultaneously opening up space for themselves in the society of British Guiana.

Ultimately people of African descent were forging a diaspora of the imagination, with connections to the Black Atlantic, with African Americans and with Ethiopia, as a representation of an ancestral continental homeland. Indians drew direct links to the country of their heritage to maintain a connection to India and forge stronger relations. Environmental and economic distress, and a vibrant international milieu which manifested in the colony locally, provide the context for the series of strikes that rocked British Guiana in 1935 and would begin to create fissures in the scaffolding of racialized colonialism.
CHAPTER 3 – “Slavery Done Long Time”: The Labor Rebellions of 1935

Introduction

On October 18, 1935, the *Nottingham Evening Post* in the United Kingdom reported the following about British Guiana:

…serious trouble has broken out in connection with a strike on the sugar plantations, here thousands of labourers have downed tools to enforce a demand for higher wages.

A cordon of police has been thrown round the town to prevent an incursion by the strikers, who are in angry mood, and martial law, it is stated, has been proclaimed.

It is understood that a British warship is en route [to] Georgetown in response [to] urgent summons.¹

This announcement appeared in the newspaper over a month and a half after the rebellions of 1935 travelled across the coast of the country. The governor of the colony had already declared a state of emergency and news of the unrest had already reached Great Britain, India, and other parts of the Caribbean, despite the fact that the local press had agreed to suppress coverage in order to stem the spread of the protests.² These rebellions in the sugar cane fields and streets of British Guiana garnered international attention, yet they have been erased from public memory and consciousness.

This chapter explores what it meant to work and protest on the edge of empire. I trace the series of labor rebellions led by African and Indian youth, women, and men on sugar plantations in 1935 with a spotlight on their demands and experiences. Despite differences, Africans and Indians shared an experience of exploitation on sugar plantations, an impoverished and degrading subsistence, and desires to lead sustainable lives and preserve their dignity. Contrary to historiography that centers conflict, I argue that 1935 represents a moment of historical

² Northcote to Cunliffe-Lister, January 24, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
possibility, where seeds of solidarity were planted through the actions of ordinary people. In British Guiana, where plantation workers had been pitted against each other for generations, an alliance was not a given. These rebellions did not erase racialized identities or minimize ethnic differences; rather, workers drew on different histories of racial, imperial, and class exploitation on the one hand, and ethnic and diasporic identities on the other, to challenge a system that was dehumanizing.

Contemporaries often observed that laborers in British Guiana were “unable to reason” and could not comprehend the consequences of their actions. In response to the unrest, one plantation owner stated that he believed that “the people had gone crazy.” Indeed, madness was necessary, as the risks were great. In addition to the reprisals from plantation owners, protesters were criminalized and the power of the colonial state was marshaled against them. Racialized stereotypes permeated the discourse: many colonial elites erroneously believed that Blacks were instigators and troublemakers and that Indians were intimidated followers.

Using previously un-mined archival source material, this chapter demonstrates that Indian and African working people exhibited shrewdness in their resistance to labor exploitation, in the assertion of their rights, and with regard to strike strategy. Drawing on the specter of enslavement, workers pushed back against the plantation system and challenged the heart of its unspoken arrangements. In the midst of high unemployment, labor surplus, and environmental distress, they argued for wages that could sustain them, for better conditions, for an end to corrupt practices and abusive treatment, and for collective power, voice, and representation.

The disturbances of 1935 occurred in an international milieu of labor rebellions, socialist struggle, anti-colonialism, and race war in Ethiopia. The Attorney General called this moment
“unprecedented” in British Guiana’s history. These rebellions were a combination of strikes, protests, sabotage, and processions. They featured elements of cultural performance and drama, with marches, drums, music, “African exhibition dances,” and coerced incorporation of overseers and other plantation staff into the marches. Participants utilized the same accoutrements of protest—red flags, cutlasses, and sticks. Although the origins of the red flags are currently unclear, they were associated with the British Guiana Labour Union. Other key features were that youth played a significant role, a myriad of workers emerged as grassroots leaders, and that participants were of African and Indian descent.

By focusing the lens on the 1930s, a fertile moment of labor rebellion, this work also challenges the long historiographical focus on racial conflict and tragedy in British Guiana. The workforce and living arrangements were largely, although not entirely, segmented racially—both due to planter and colonial efforts of “divide and rule” and to the historical experience of enslavement and indenture. Often scholars describe Guyana as a “plural society” (or use the framework)—acknowledging little integration between racial communities. However, there are those scholars who have argued that Guyanese have “common cultural equipment” or that there exists in Guyanese society a cultural continuum of recognition. The hard lines drawn between Indians and Africans are connected to the British obsession with taxonomy and race, as well as the post-emancipation identities that developed in British Guiana. The occurrences of

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4 Historian Juanita De Barros briefly described these processions that merged with labor forces, as a cultural force that rose to the surface in the beginning of the 20th century, rooted both in Indian and African cultural traditions of Tadjah and Jonkannu respectively. Juanita De Barros, Order and Place in a Colonial City: Patterns of Struggle and Resistance in Georgetown, British Guiana, 1889-1924 (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).
5 See the Introduction of the dissertation for a discussion of the historiography.
1935 tell a different type of story, one in which there were kernels of a common consciousness and cultural force.

Despite the complicated dimensions of race, labor, gender, and age, this moment demonstrated the binding effect of a common cause among workers who took on a private sugar plantation enterprise and the colonial state. The unrest that spread across the coast convinced the British that there was mounting anti-European sentiment in the colony, that demands for better living and working conditions needed to be addressed exigently, that governmental labor protections should be instituted, and that greater inclusion and representation by the masses of people in their government was critical.

**Overview**

Those who struck admitted that they went on strike because it was grinding season, a time when they stood the best chance of gaining concessions from their employers. The strikes operated as an important referendum on the operations of the estates. Many sought higher wages as well as better living and working conditions. They demanded the removal of abusive overseers and drivers and an end to corrupt practices.

Strikes were not the only means that workers used to contest injustice on the estates. There were also those who lashed out individually or in small pockets to disrupt the plantation system and exercise power and voice that had been denied them. At the heart of the movement was a strong desire for representation of their interests, since there were no officials in government truly dedicated to representing workers. It was an uneven playing field, for certainly the sugar planters often had their will reinforced by the colonial police force and also had their interests heavily represented in the colonial state.
Although they existed, unions did not have bargaining power, nor even the right to enter the estates, so workers lacked local institutions that could truly defend their interests collectively. As Chapter Two discussed, the most important union at this time was the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU). Although it appears that it was not a leading force in these rebellions, its history of organizing sugar workers and its mark—the dramatic red flags—are unmistakable.

The youth presence in this series of strikes was extensive. A new generation of workers saw the conditions as a continuation of old oppressive dynamics and militantly chose to stand against them. Younger workers whose parents had been indentured laborers insisted that they deserved better. Overall demographic trends in British Guiana impacted this strike. By 1931, 88.3% of the entire Guyanese population was native born.\(^8\) The entire population was quite young, with the majority under the age of 25.\(^9\)

Finally, these strikes did not occur in a vacuum. Labor movements were sweeping across the Caribbean, the wider Americas, and globally. In the British West Indies alone there had been a number of serious protests before 1935. British Guiana itself exploded in a smaller series of strikes in 1933 and 1934, Belize erupted in February and October 1934 and again in November 1934, Trinidad was besieged by hunger marches and strikes in July of 1934, and agricultural workers went on strike in St. Kitts in January of 1935, followed by riots in St. Vincent in October.\(^10\) In addition, the international milieu—including the rallying cry “Workers of the World Unite” under socialism and the visions of diaspora animating Indian and African

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\(^8\) Information derived from page xxxiii (table listed under note 185) in Government of British Guiana, Report on the Results of the Census of the Population, 1931 (Georgetown: "The Argosy" company, 1932)

\(^9\) British Guiana Census 1931, xxiii (note 131).

communities, which reveal a rising racial consciousness on the ground—was part of the atmosphere in British Guiana of the 1930s.

During these labor disruptions, demonstrators not only refused to work, but also convinced, and in many instances coerced, others to join and swell representations of labor’s discontent. They cut phone lines, attacked managers and overseers, burned crops, resisted police and armed troopers, and shut down factory after factory. Ordinary men and women spoke for the crowds of workers demanding change. Scores of colonial police were brought in to maintain control. At times the crowds grew so large that even armed policemen shrunk back from the fray, watching workers shut down factories until reinforcements could arrive.

The wave of labor actions that occurred in 1935 were a conflagration of forces and political responses that unearthed richer evidence about the quality of life, or lack thereof, on plantations. The cross-racial and militant nature of this particular strike is critical: Africans and Indians had found reason to collaborate despite differences in circumstances. The incidents outlined in greater detail below, and others, reinforced the idea among the colonial power and planter society that these actions were “Bolshevick” and amounted to a threat against both the sugar industry and the British colonial regime. Shocked by the spread of the protests, the governor, Sir Geoffrey Northcote, appointed a commission to investigate the causes and make recommendations. The commission collected almost 1,000 pages of testimony in the course of their investigations.

Waving Red Flags: Johanna Harris, Hubert Critchlow, and the BGLU

The British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU) was a significant force in these rebellions. Although they did not control the direction or form of the protests, their organizing work helped make them possible. The BGLU held roving meetings across the colony about unemployment
and the crisis in Ethiopia. They had important international labor connections—in the Caribbean, in Russia, and in other parts of Europe. Earlier in the year, the estate owners’ stonewalling regarding conditions and wages frustrated the BGLU, who complained to the governor and the Colonial Office in vain. They warned British officials of the high potential for trouble if actions were not taken on behalf of the workers.

The BGLU was the oldest trade union in British Guiana and arguably the most important union at the time, due to its consciousness-raising work, its efforts to push the colonial government and King George V to intervene on behalf of sugar workers, and its infamous red flags—a symbolic linking of the struggles across plantations. At its height during the late 1920s the BGLU had more than 10,000 members.\(^{11}\) And over the years, the BGLU hosted a few conferences that brought together labor leaders from across the West Indies in British Guiana, including the very first one of its kind, in 1926.\(^{12}\)

The president of the union in 1935 was actually a woman, Johanna Harris. This fact seems extraordinary given that during this period union leadership in British Guiana seems to be dominated by men although women were present and active. There exist documents with her signature; however, I never found anything referring to her speaking or representing the union publicly. This lack of information may shed light on particular challenges with archival research. The politics of archive-making and collecting often challenge the scholar’s ability to recover the direct voices of actors, particularly youth, women and non-elites—even for those who had leadership roles, as in Harris’ case. There is also the possibility that her voice was submerged even when she was alive due to the conventions of public discourse, active exclusion, or her own

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decision to work behind the scenes. This gap opens up space for more research about Harris’
particular role and the role of women in union and social movements broadly during this period
of British Guianese history.

Hubert Critchlow’s leadership of the union is what survives in the archive. Critchlow
served as the general secretary of the union in 1935 and was an early labor leader in the larger
Caribbean who had worked to build international connections. Originally a stevedore by trade,
he did not have formal education beyond secondary school, and he worked in many industries
until he registered the BGLU with the government in 1919. Critchlow admitted travelling to
Russia to meet with unions there. He also met with a Black labor organization in Germany. He
had ties to Pan Africanist and Communist Party member George Padmore, whose books and
pamphlets were banned in British Guiana.

Critchlow often found his activities under surveillance because of his leftist and anti-
colonial politics. When the commission investigated the rebellions, Critchlow was called to
testify and had the following exchange about his beliefs:

   Chairman:
   I did not ask you if you were a Communist as a result of your study; but you studied the
doctrines of Communism?

   Critchlow:
   Yes, I studied them.

   The Chairman:
   Would you tell us which are the doctrines you have embraced?

   Critchlow:
   The doctrine I have embraced is that everything should be owned by the Government,
such as the stores becoming government property and so on. I think they should all be
owned by Government.

   Chairman:
   Including the sugar estates?
Critchlow:
Yes…..

Chairman: Anything else you embraced besides mutual property?

Critchlow: How the factories are worked.

Chairman: Anything else?

Critchlow: There are lots of other things, how hospitals are run; how if a man gets sick he can send for the doctor and get him whether he has a shilling or not. Those particular things I agree with. Money is no barrier to education and so on. Those things I agree with.\(^\text{13}\)

Ultimately, Critchlow claimed that he was unaware of the strikes and concurrent actions, and that the BGLU was not involved. There were penalties for instigating rebellions. Individuals could face jail time, forced hard labor, fines, or whippings. Indeed, none of the workers who were brought before the commission admitted to an instigator role. Critchlow did admit that he met with workers from several of the estates before, during, and after the outbreaks occurred.

The BGLU also sent its resolution to London about Ethiopia during the heat of the strikes. Critchlow confirmed that he issued a pamphlet entitled “Strike, Strike, Strike” but claimed that he did not remember when it was issued and surmised that it was years before this incident.\(^\text{14}\)

Further, the BGLU sent a letter to the Colonial Office in January of the same year warning of impending unrest if conditions on the sugar plantations were not addressed.\(^\text{15}\)

Critchlow functioned as a bridge person between racial communities. He demonstrated a deep understanding of the conditions in British Guiana and concern for all workers. He was

\(^{13}\) See pages 496-497 in “Evidence of Mr. Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow” in *Labour Disputes Commission, 1935, Evidence of Witnesses*, 467-516, CO 111/739/2, National Archives of the UK, London.

\(^{14}\) “Evidence of Mr. Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow,” 506.

\(^{15}\) Northcote to Cunliffe-Lister, January 24, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
nicknamed the Black Crosby\textsuperscript{16} for his work with sugar laborers, so named after “the indefatigable” Immigration Agent General James Crosby, who supported Indian indentured workers for 22 years, from 1858-1880.\textsuperscript{17} Critchlow seemed to understand the importance of race, representation, and building connections with the wider Caribbean labor movement. The latter was evidenced by his invitation to an East Indian labor leader from Trinidad named Chandra Bahadoor Mathura, who was president of the clerk’s section of the Trinidad Labour Association.\textsuperscript{18} Mathura toured the countryside with Critchlow speaking to workers. Critchlow testified,

The thing Mathura preached was that the people must recognize, that everything would be done to prevent them from recognizing, and their conditions were worse than in Trinidad. He did say “You can march to town and see the Governor if you can’t get what you want from the employer.”\textsuperscript{19}

Mathura’s presence and commentary in British Guiana speaks to the relationship between labor organizers in the British Caribbean. Trinidad had experienced labor unrest the year before and would erupt into violent protest two years later.

Based on the evidence, BGLU involvement was clear. The ubiquitous red flags, in part, demonstrate this connection. However, it is also clear that the majority of the strikes and concurrent protests were decentralized, and many were spontaneous. There was no single person to whom the government could turn who could halt the rebellions. Unlike other parts of the Caribbean where national middle class leaders rose to become the lead spokespersons for labor protestors, in British Guiana, the rebellions were led by everyday working people.

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\textsuperscript{16} Carlyle Harry, \textit{Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow: His Main Tasks and Achievements} (Georgetown: Guyana National Publishing Centre, 1977), 8.
\textsuperscript{17} Basdeo Mangru, “Letter to the Editor: There Should Be a Memorial in Guyana to Immigration Agent General James Crosby,” \textit{Stabroek News}, May 19, 2013. \url{http://www.stabroeknews.com/2013/opinion/letters/05/19/there-should-be-a-memorial-in-guyana-to-immigration-agent-general-james-crosby/}
\textsuperscript{19} “Evidence of Mr. Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow,” 495.
\end{flushright}
The Beginning of the Rebellions: Arjoon, Basdeo, and the Young Men of Leonora

The labor rebellions began on August 30, 1935, when 80 young men from the “boy gang”20 insisted that plantation management address their grievances and went on strike to punctuate their demands. 21 They were workers from the Leonora Plantation, located on the West Coast of Demerara. The rebellions at Leonora highlight youth leadership and the rise of a generation challenging plantation culture. They also raise interesting questions about women’s participation. Finally, Leonora participants included both Indian and African workers as well as all three classes of sugar estate labor: resident, villager, and pasture.

Table 3. Categories of Workers22

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resident Laborers</th>
<th>Village laborers</th>
<th>Pasture Workers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers who lived on the sugar estate in rent-free or reduced-cost estate housing with ‘free’ access to estate hospitals. These laborers tended to be the lowest paid on the estates. They were employed year-round, and worked primarily as cultivators. This group was majority East Indian.</td>
<td>Laborers who lived in independent settlements near the estates. They built their own homes and often relied on the sugar estate for employment. They worked primarily as seasonal cane-cutters during harvest time. The majority of these workers were African, with a significant presence of East Indians.</td>
<td>Laborers who rented land and erected their own housing on estate grounds. They were a very small percentage of the working population and were “generally East Indians.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The plantation manager, Leonard Lywood, testified, “[t]his particular Boy Gang is comprised of boys living in estate ranges and boys living on the estate pastures where they have their own houses and in the villages….The majority of them are East Indians but some are black.

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20 “Evidence of Mr. Leonard Lywood,” in Labour Disputes Commission, 1935, Evidence of Witnesses, 1-34, CO 111/739/2, National Archives of the UK, London. The boy gang on this plantation referred to male youth ages 14-15, as well as men with health challenges, “not fit to work in the Shovel Gang, probably suffering from Asthma…..” They had “easier work” and were responsible for weeding, moulding, cutting cane, and cleaning trenches.


22 This information is gleaned from page 12-13 in Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into and Report on The Labour Disputes in Demerara and Berbice During the Months of September and October, 1935 (Georgetown: “The Argosy” Company, 1936), CO 111/739/1, National Archives of the UK, London.
The majority of those who struck were from the villages.\textsuperscript{23} After complaining to Lywood and receiving an unsatisfactory response, the strikers and “a big crowd” of people from their communities marched to the house of the Inspector of Police, who also called the District Commissioner, listed as Mr. Green.

These workers expressed several grievances, including low wages and mistreatment by the head overseer, W. O. B. Rigden. They stated that the prices that the overseer set for work were grievously insufficient. For certain types of task work, the amount of the payment was often determined after the tasks were completed. Workers argued that this practice was fundamentally unfair. In a dispatch to the Colonial Office, the governor also acknowledged that this practice seemed to be prejudicial against the workers.\textsuperscript{24} The strikers demanded that the head overseer be fired, citing abuse. They alleged that Rigden fined 16 members of their group unjustly the week before. They claimed that he was “too particular” in his inspections of their work, that he cussed them “too bad,” treated them in a “cruel” manner, and sought revenge against those who had struck the year before.\textsuperscript{25}

Two brothers who worked on Plantation Leonora had been involved in strikes the year before, in 1934. They appear in the record simply as Arjoon, who was in his late twenties and worked in the shovel gang, and Basdeo, in his early twenties, in the boy gang. Lywood noted that after their involvement in the strikes the year before, the brothers travelled across the colony working on other plantations before returning to Leonora estates. He also believed that they were

\textsuperscript{23} “Evidence of Mr. Leonard Lywood,” 2.
\textsuperscript{24} Northcote to Ormsby-Gore, March 4, 1937, CO 111/739/1, National Archives of the UK, London.
\textsuperscript{25} “Evidence of Mr. Leonard Lywood,” 3-5; Report of the Commissioners, 3.
the ringleaders, supporting this idea by stating, “[t]hey are probably able to read and have the gift of using their tongue....”

Over the weekend, the workers called in Dr. Jung Bahadur Singh. Singh was president of the British Guiana East Indian Association and had taken multiple trips to India. A private doctor and Legislative Council Representative for Western Demerara, Singh was described as “an Indian, [who] has interested himself in the welfare of Indians in the Colony for many years....” Singh was unable to help, and he believed that “the labourers in their excited state of mind were not able to reason.” This idea that sugarcane workers were unable to reason permeated elite testimonies and writing, even among those who saw themselves as allies. To the strikers’ disappointment, Lywood, Singh, and Green all cosigned that Rigden could not be fired without formal evidence.

By Monday, September 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1935, “the entire laboring population of Leonora had come out on strike.” Armed with sticks, hundreds of workers walked miles from the Leonora estates, on their way to Georgetown. Lywood, who had just crossed the river from the capital, was returning to the West Coast, Demerara. At the Vreed-en-Hoop railway station, the crowd of workers accosted him. Someone from the mass of people hurled “burnt earth” through the side screen of his car. Another hit his car with a stick. However, they were persuaded not to go to Georgetown, and the next morning a “deputation from some 300-400 labourers” met with

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\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 20. When asked whether caste was a key feature of the rebellion, Lywood argued that personality was more significant and that caste was not influential.
\textsuperscript{27} Report of the Commissioners, 18.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{30} Today, the town they walked to, Vreed-en-Hoop, is nine miles from Leonora. One of the reports noted that they were going to visit Singh in Georgetown. Georgetown, the capital, lies across the river from Vreed-en-Hoop.
\textsuperscript{31} This depot town located on the Demerara river was founded by the Dutch. The name translates as Peace and Hope.
Lywood, the plantation manager; Rhodes, the company attorney; Chantrell, another manager connected to Leonora; and Green, the District Commissioner, at his office in Vreed-en-Hoop.\textsuperscript{32}

In addition to the concerns about wages, price-setting, and mistreatment by the head overseer, Rigden, the workers also raised other concerns on behalf of others: their wives, children, and elders. They argued that pregnant women were being forced to work, that “grannies” and others had to walk too far to work (upwards of six miles away from their homes), and that drivers hired for the women’s weeding gang were too young.\textsuperscript{33}

Lywood, the manager, denied that pregnant women were forced or expected to work. He said, “we are dead against it because of the injury that might result to the women working in that condition. I am not saying it does not occur, because if you stop pregnant women from working there would be a strike in that case, but we do not permit it if it can be avoided….We do not press any of them to work.”\textsuperscript{34} On some plantations, managers actually refused to allow women who were pregnant to work, but during grinding season, women often worked while pregnant anyway. In Austin Clarke’s \textit{The Polished Hoe}, a novel about plantation life and the legacies of slavery and colonialism in Barbados, readers receive a compelling window into pregnancy on the plantation. The protagonist, Mary Mathilda, reflected on her mother’s generation of women and their response to fieldwork post-pregnancy:

Women of her generation knew how to carry burdens. And how to bury them. Inside their hearts. Concealed in their blood. They were strong women, then. Tough women. Women who gave birth in the fields today, and returned to raise their hoe and lift their load two afternoons later; within forty-eight hours. In the same fields. Yes.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{32} Report of the Commissioners, 19.
\textsuperscript{33} “Evidence of Mr. Leonard Lywood,” 3-9.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{35} Austin Clarke, \textit{The Polished Hoe: A Novel} (New York: Amistad, 2003), 37.
One complaint workers levied against plantation staff was that when married women did not go to work, managers docked their husbands’ pay. Additionally, for women who were paid directly, often their wages were critical for a family’s survival—time off was not an option.

With respect to the other demands, Lywood agreed to allow the elderly women to work closer to their homes whenever possible, but he argued that the dams on his estates were in good condition, good enough to ride a bicycle on. But dams in British Guiana were largely earthen, not the concrete structures one might imagine. After rain, walking or riding on a dam was akin to making one’s way through mud. For women and men, young and old, these miles-long walks to work could be treacherous.

The concern workers expressed about the young drivers was probably due to the fact that women were routinely assaulted and harassed while working on the plantations. The assumption behind this idea was that older men with families would not behave in inappropriate ways. In fact, neither age nor family was determinant of inappropriate behavior, but this idea appeared to be common. Lywood summarily dismissed the complaint about young drivers. He asserted that the men he hired were married and had children. In fact, “some of them [had] from 3 to 9 ‘known’ children,” he claimed—as if this meant that they would not recognize women.

One other grievance from some of the workers warrants mention. On Plantation Leonora, unlike on many other estates that had fully segregated work teams, half of the cane-cutters were Black and the other half were East Indian. They all worked in the same fields. Some of the East Indian cane-cutters who were present complained that they wanted to cut cane in their own separate fields. The reason: “[T]he blacks get up at 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning and when they

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36 “Evidence of Mr. Leonard Lywood,” 28.
37 Ibid., 8.
[East Indian cane-cutters] get there they could not get work.”

The chairman asked Lywood about the nature of their concerns: “What they really wanted then was that a specific portion of the work should be reserved for them?” Lywood explained: “Yes, because as things were the other people did not leave much work for them to do. We could only burn a certain amount of canes to supply our mills and when the work is taken up by others they have to wait.”

British colonialism had a deep and long history of “divide and rule.” These efforts were often reinforced by plantation culture and the particular historical circumstance in British Guiana. Born of pragmatic reasons, latent bias likely underscored the workers’ request.

Lywood was particularly disturbed by the allegations of mistreatment against the head overseer, Rigden, who had worked under Lywood for 18 years. He found it difficult to believe that Rigden treated the workers disrespectfully and ultimately announced that he would not fire him. The day of his announcement, cane fields at Cornelia Ida (a section of the Leonora Estates) went up in unauthorized flames; 1,100 tons of cane were burnt.

Similar to all of his counterparts throughout the colony, Lywood testified that he did not know that protests would envelop the estates that he managed and that no information had been leaked to him or Rigden beforehand. This admission demonstrated the level of organization among workers and the distance between the planters and workers. However, Lywood was one of the few plantation managers who believed that the unrest was the result of concerted action. He did not argue, as his counterparts would, that some workers were forced or bamboozled into participating. He was, however, surprised by the level of support the young men who initially struck garnered, especially from the families and laborers who resided on the estates. The commissioners asked him why so many people supported the effort by not showing up to work.

38 Ibid., 21.
39 Ibid.
He responded, “[t]he boys, I suppose, were related to quite a number of women—wives and daughters probably—and probably their father is a shovelman. That is the only connection I could see, and that they were sympathetic. I could not see any other reason.”⁴⁰ At a later date, the commissioners would recognize another significant explanation: that those workers who lived on the estates “welcomed the action taken by more independent Pasture and Village labourers.”⁴¹ These young men probably did not know that when they struck, they were starting a movement that would traverse coastal Guiana.

In Lywood’s testimony, women are formulated as supporters only—as wives and daughters, not as actors in their own right, participating because the strikes were also tied to their own interests. Women were a solid workforce on the estates, and they too had grievances, some of which in fact were articulated by the men. It is more than reasonable to claim that while some women participated to simply support the young men, surely others also saw the strikes as furthering their own cause and as a way to challenge the plantation themselves.

Lywood’s belief that Arjoon and Basdeo had leadership roles was conceivable; they had previous strike experience and their travels and mobility probably contributed to their intolerance of what they saw as injustice. Lywood clearly associated increased education of plantation workers with increased ability to cause “trouble.” He was not alone in this assumption. Governor Northcote, once he finally accepted that East Indians were involved in the disturbances, declared that in the past,

The unsophisticated East Indian indentured labourer regarded the Manager of the estate on which he was employed as his ‘father and mother’, and had implicit faith in the justice which would be meted out to him...

During recent years, however, advantage has been taken by the East Indian of the facilities given for education, and an increasingly large number of the younger East

⁴⁰ “Evidence of Mr. Leonard Lywood,” 24-25.
⁴¹ Report of the Commissioners, 19.
Indians on estates are able to read and write English. Although on racial grounds these young men are not prepared to follow blindly the dictates of the negro agitator, yet at the same time they are beginning to recognize the benefits which can be obtained by collective bargaining.\textsuperscript{42}

Although his comments about the “unsophisticated East Indian labourer” were filled with condescension and paternalism, these statements represented a reversal of Northcote’s earlier interpretation of the strikes as a Black movement in which East Indians participated due to coercion. He could no longer deny East Indian active participation and leadership. He recognized that there was a new generation of East Indians, who refused to accept certain conditions, who grew up and were educated in British Guiana and challenged accepted norms. What he did not acknowledge was that there was a strong tradition of East Indian and African worker struggles—by their parents, grandparents, and ancestors—upon which the strikes of 1935 drew.

The events on Leonora Plantation marked the beginning of precipitous rebellion, moving from plantation after plantation, from the West Coast to the East Coast, to the East Bank of Demerara and on to the Berbice region.\textsuperscript{43} A few examples of this two-month rash of rebellions follow.

Race, Capital, and Labor: The Strikes at Le Resouvenir Estates

On September 10\textsuperscript{th}, the British Guiana Labour Union held a meeting on the railway line.\textsuperscript{44} A day later, only 24 hours after the estates at Leonora on the West Coast finally calmed down, trouble struck the East Coast of Demerara, at Le Resouvenir Estates. Le Resouvenir included La Bonne Intention, Chateau Margot, Success, Le Resouvenir, Felicity, Montrose, Vyrheid’s Lust, and Better Hope. The labor rebellions at these estates demonstrated leadership

\textsuperscript{42} Northcote to Cunliffe-Lister, January 24, 1936, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
\textsuperscript{43} See Appendix I for 1931 map of British Guiana.
from both East Indian and African communities, particularly again from young men who convinced their elders to participate in the shut-down. They also highlighted the tensions among workers themselves and the particularly limited choices facing resident workers. Further, all workers did not sympathize with or support the strikers. The situation at Le Resouvenir Estates highlighted the different manifestations of racism levied against Blacks and East Indians. Finally, the threat of communism loomed large for plantation staff and challenged their beliefs about their connection to workers on their estates. When asked about the red flags that people used during the disturbances, the plantation manager for Enmore estates, Reginald Payne, argued that they represented “[a] certain amount of Communism.” Payne maintained that the local newspapers reported on communism, making workers aware of these ideas.45

The manager, Charles Hamilton Palmer, was alarmed when he was informed that the whole East Indian shovel gang at Vyrheid’s Lust was on strike demanding better pricing for their work and the dismissal of the driver Ramsingh.46 Palmer, who had 29 years of experience working on the sugar estates, decided to act quickly to respond to the demands.47 He put Ramsingh on half-pay pending an investigation; Ramsingh reportedly put “$1 due to 20 men for watering young canes in 1 man’s name.”48 Ramsingh’s alleged action was one of the corrupt practices that workers organized against: when drivers or overseers supported their friends or favorites at the expense of others. Palmer declined to make an increase in pay for punt-loading but agreed to consider an increase for half-banking and planting.

Some workers returned to the fields, but the punt loaders continued to strike. An exasperated Palmer tried to bring in resident estate workers to take their place, but strikers

45 “Evidence of Reginald Hubert Payne,” 71.
47 “Evidence of Charles Hamilton Palmer,” 75.
prevented those workers from entering the fields. Days later, a group of majority Black cane-cutters from Beterverwagting village also refused to work if they did not receive an increase in payment and the level of pricing beforehand. Apparently, although “…large numbers of black cane-cutters went aback,” ten to twelve “roughs” who were not regular workers created a “disturbance” to stop everyone from working. There were 150 cane-cutters on the fields. Palmer testified that strikers “assaulted an East Indian boy and said he must leave work. In one case a Black woman was carried bodily across the trench from the field.” Although no other assaults occurred, the majority of workers left the fields.49 The use of violence and physical coercion against fellow workers establishes the fact that not all workers supported the strikes. If a young man was assaulted or a woman was physically carried across a trench, presumably it was because they chose to continue to work. Their reasons may be varied: financial need, disagreement with the idea or form of the strikes, distrust of other workers, greater fear of plantation owners, loyalty to the plantation, or simply personality disposition. Regardless, protestors often lashed out at those who tried to defy the protests.

On the night of September 29th, unauthorized fires were set across 10 acres of land, affecting 400 tons of cane.50 On October 1st, Palmer met with a “majority” African group of villagers who persisted in their refusal to cut cane. In addition, eight to ten of them, armed with cutlasses and sticks, guarded the fields in case Palmer tried to bring in estate workers to replace them. Realizing the workers’ intransigence, Palmer agreed to fix prices for the dam across from the fields. However, this decision did not end his troubles. Over 200 hundred people amassed, continuing to make demands. They were all villagers, “a few East Indians but the majority of

50 “Evidence of Charles Hamilton Palmer,” 78.
them were blacks.” Palmer reported that some of “the older people” asked him to appease the strikers, so that they could get back to work.51

Palmer called the police, and the next day, Inspector Jones arrived on the scene at 5:00am with 20 men. 10 of the police officers escorted Palmer and 80 resident estate cane-cutters to the fields. Three “black men” were hidden in the fields and chased the workers away, “carrying the police with them,” leaving Palmer and his deputy manager in the field alone. From there, alternating groups of eight to ten workers kept resident workers from returning to the fields.

At Vryheid’s Lust, circumstances had not improved. On October 3rd, Palmer heard that “the Vryheid’s Lust Boy Gang were stopping the mule boys from transporting canes to the factory.” When he arrived there, a group of 25 East Indian young men from the boy gang, resident laborers, ages 16-17, were “sitting on the dam with 2 red flags planted near them.” “I spoke to them,” he said, “and they would not answer a word.” As we know from the testimonies examined in Chapter Two, some resident laborers lost their jobs and homes for participating in the rebellions. To ignore the manager of the estate was open defiance of both employer and landlord. Palmer was perturbed by the fact that these resident laborers ignored him. The young men simply stood up and left him where he was standing.

They went into the fields “where the Shovel Gang were working, ran through the field stopping at each man talking.” After “continued intervention of the boys,” within half an hour, the workers “began to leave their work in twos and threes.” They then turned to the weeding gang. Eventually, they too turned and walked off, followed by the puntloaders, who also agreed to stop working. 52

51 Ibid., 79.
52 Ibid., 204-205.
Their ranks continued to swell. By the evening, they were joined by “the Le Ressouvenir and Chateau Margot boys, all of whom had been previously working without comment.” They intended to completely shut down the factory. At this point, an agitated Palmer contacted the District Commissioner and the County Inspector, and arranged for police presence to protect the factory. 20 police officers arrived on the estate.\textsuperscript{53}

In general, sugar estate workers did not own phones, but they understood the strategic importance of cutting off communication for the plantation staff—it delayed their ability to reach the police. By 5:00am Friday morning, Palmer found that his phone lines had been cut, but Inspector Jones was already on his way with more reinforcements to the estate. Jones sent Inspector Webber with another 10 officers to Vryheid’s Lust, stationed 10 more “with batons on the factory bridge,” and stationed others on the middle walk bridge. By 11:00am, Lywood received reports that “Some black shovelmen from the village came in and said that large gangs of boys had tried to stop them from working and said they must not work and that when they told the boys they wanted to work [,] the boys took their cutlasses and cut their shovel sticks to pieces so that they could not work.”\textsuperscript{54}

The situation continued to escalate. By 1:00pm, Palmer “saw a large crowd estimated at about 400 men and boys with red flags waiving and drums beating pouring down the middle walk dam towards the factory. They were armed with sticks and cutlasses.” The workers “rushed through both lots of police and went into the factory.” Even though there were 25 officers stationed at the factory itself, upon seeing the massive crowd, the police officers withdrew and did nothing. The crowd forced the engine drivers to stop the mills. Palmer tried in vain to talk to

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 205-206.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 206.
them, but they were shouting. He claimed that people were yelling “capital and labour!” These chants were associated with workers movements and international communism.

People from the estate and the villages joined the demonstration and the crowd swelled to 1,000 people. The action became an outpouring of frustration. After Palmer insisted that he could pay no more, the crowd “quieted down” and the factory restarted. The “commotion” resumed when 40 armed officers and 10 mounted troopers led by Inspector Murtland arrived on the scene. Palmer denied calling the police, but the crowd blamed him for their expanded presence.

Finally, District Commissioner Laing arrived and agreed to meet with the laborers the next day. Workers demanded outside representation and requested that Dr. Singh participate. Palmer spoke to the chairman of his board, Mr. W. S. Jones, about the situation: “We had never had any outside influence brought in on estate matters before and our opinion was that it was best not to bring in outsiders…”. However, the management acquiesced, met with the people and their representatives the following day, and hammered out an agreement.

The main issues raised were insufficient wages and ensuring that prices for work would be given beforehand. Vryheid’s Lust workers also asked for additional land so that they could cultivate rice, lower agistment cattle fees (payment workers made to estates to allow cattle to graze on their property), and an end to the reduction of women’s remuneration if they did not work on Tuesdays. They also requested that Ramsingh of Vryheid’s Lust be allowed to return to work, but that Seebarran, the Head Driver of La Bonne Intention, should be dismissed. Palmer agreed to additional land for rice and an end to the reduction of women’s rates for not attending work on Tuesdays. He stated that he could not agree to a general increase in wages because the

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state of sugar profits did not allow for it. He also declined to lower agistment fees.\textsuperscript{59} Palmer refused to dismiss Seebarran because he maintained that he made all decisions regarding fines and that Seebarran was not responsible for the problem. Ramsaroop Maraj, a local pandit known for his philanthropy and care for the Hindu community and the indigent, was brought into the negotiations as well. Ultimately, however, the negotiations were in vain. From October 6\textsuperscript{th}-20\textsuperscript{th}, workers from Resouvenir Estates “with cutlasses, sticks, flags and whistles” continued the strikes and prevented others from working. Palmer’s estates lost 115 tons of cane.\textsuperscript{60}

At Le Resouvenir Estates, strikers were empowered, and there is clear evidence that both racialized communities joined in the strikes. Youth organized others to participate by meeting with the various categories of workers and convincing them not to work. This strategy was largely successful and demonstrates their recognition that the more people they involved, the greater the possibility of having their demands met. Some workers also threatened people, particularly those who opposed the strikes or were commandeered to break them. At these disturbances, one of the main purposes of resident workers was brought to bear: in an emergency, they were a stopgap and an ideally controllable workforce. Yet, several of the leaders of the strikes were also resident laborers. Therefore, the events at Le Resouvenir Estates exemplified some of the clashes between workers themselves, as well as the growing power of the protestors—especially given that other workers were not the only people they intimidated. They were even able to push back the police, establishing both the strength of the workers and the limitations of the colonial police force.

\textsuperscript{59} On this estate, agistment fees were eight cents per head per month. Palmer argued that if fees were lowered, he would be unable to pay stock minders or those responsible for cleaning the trenches. \textit{Report of the Commissioners}, 22.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Report of the Commissioners}, 23.
Finally, Palmer claimed that workers yelled “capital and labour.” Whether or not they actually yelled this, his statement and larger testimony demonstrated the fear of communist ideology and the increasing detachment planter staff felt from the workers. Palmer’s testimony also highlights the fact that at this moment in time, plantation management still held seemingly absolute power in that they were not required to negotiate with workers as a body, nor were they required to involve “outsiders,” people’s representatives in the form of lawyers or union leaders.

**Lusignan Estates: Bringing The Abyssinian War Home**

The disturbances continued to infect other plantations. Lusignan Estates offer a window into the cultural elements of the strikes, as well as the racial dynamics. It was at Lusignan that workers openly declared that they were bringing the war in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) to British Guiana.

Most of the testimony about what happened at Lusignan came from the career plantation manager, William Henry Richards. The territory under Richards’ supervision was vast.\(^{61}\) Richards testified, “I had been watching very keenly because I had heard of trouble on other estates. I had heard of trouble at Enmore and La Bonne Intention, but I had no indication at all….”\(^{62}\) At Mon Repos, there was a group of canecutters who went on strike. H. C. Humphrys, one of the members of the Sugar Producers Association who attended the evidence-gathering hearings that the commissioners led, asked him directly about the canecutters: “What nationalities were they?” Richards reported that the strikers were: “Blacks and East Indians mixed; they would be half and half.” When asked if they were residents, he replied: “They were

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\(^{61}\) Richards explained the territory under his control: “Beginning from the East you have Annandale East, Annandale West, Lusignan East, Lusignan West, Good Hope East, Good Hope West, Mon Repos East and Mon Repos West. They are all 100 rods section and that makes a façade of 800 rods. On the east is the village of Buxton adjoining Annandale and the village of Triumph and Beterverwagting adjoining Mon Repos West.” “Evidence of Mr. William Henry Richards,” 86.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 86.
all from the villages… The East Indians mostly came from Triumph and the blacks from Beterverwagting.”63 He conceded to their demands for increased wages and they subsequently returned to work.

Richards then left and went to “the Mon Repos section where we were also cutting canes with the estate blacks and the Buxton blacks.” On the way there, he met with protestors coming from Good Hope. He described them: “a mob – about 120 of them I should say – who were all blacks.” They had red flags and “a band with drums.” They asked him for increased wages, but he was convinced that their requests were unreasonable. He testified, “…they were determined to make a row. That is how it struck me from the way they were carrying on. They were half crazy waving cutlasses and red flags and beating drums, and it was not what you expect people going to do work would be doing.”64

Richards left Mon Repos, moved on to Field 17, and found no workers there. He proceeded to Good Hope and found the fields there were also deserted. He was convinced that those who were striking drove everyone away. After the commissioners questioned him about how he knew that workers had been driven off, he claimed that several workers told him, “[w]e are willing to work but dem black man would not allow we.”65

The next day, there was a dramatic confrontation at the factory. 100 workers stormed the premises “with their drums beating and their flags flying and there were always cutlasses waiving [sic]…. They spread themselves out, some on the platforms or on the mills near the water supply pumps….” Some of the factory engineers “seemed quite vexed” about the invasion and defended the factory with brass tubes that were “lying about.” Despite this, “the band and the dance went on in the middle of the factory while all the machinery was going.” Unable to stop

63 Ibid., 87.
64 Ibid., 88.
65 Ibid., 89.
the machinery, the demonstrators left. Richards promptly called the police, who were able to keep the workers out of the factory when they returned.\textsuperscript{66}

Although Richards desperately attempted to return conditions on his estate to normal, he was unsuccessful. “[W]e had had cane burnt maliciously,” he stated. As a result, many of his staff spent all of their time putting out the fires. Richards estimated that about 74 acres had been burnt on the estate without authorization.\textsuperscript{67} The fires were spreading. Unauthorized fires were set in Annandale East, and in 24 and 26 Mon Repos. Richards called in Mr. Laing, the Commissioner; Mr. Crane, the Magistrate; and Inspector Jones. The three came to the estate with reinforcements of 25 additional armed police.\textsuperscript{68}

Meanwhile, Richards’ troubles were mounting. Leonard Hares, his senior overseer, was embroiled in a war of his own. Hares had worked as overseer of Plantation Lusignan for 12 years. Protesters attacked him and forced him to carry a red flag. He claimed that they broke his arm and shouted at him, “‘Bad Abyssinia. All you white [people] got no business here. Our country; go back where you came from.’” They told him to dance, and when he responded that he didn’t know how, one of the strikers, Murray, said he would teach him and did an “African exhibition dance.” Hares said they circled him and did a “war dance” around him. He stated, “[o]ne fellow laid down and said he was an Abyssinian General....” When commissioners asked Hares why he thought they struck, Hares answered, “I suppose they thought that with the Abyssinian war on they would have a war too; in fact that is what some of them said.”\textsuperscript{69}

As Chapter Two demonstrated, diasporic concerns about the invasion of Ethiopia were pervasive in British Guiana in 1935 as evidenced by newspaper coverage, organized meetings

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\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 90-92.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 89.
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throughout the colony, labor unrest, and the BGLU and the Guianese UNIA resolutions about Ethiopia signed by hundreds of workers and sent to King George V. For many, the war in Abyssinia represented a type of re-enslavement happening on the ancestral continent at the hands of Europe, and highlighted the racialized labor exploitation of people of African descent at home.

Richards eventually saw the humiliated Hares for himself. He described the following scene:

[A] mob of about 400, all blacks…from Mon Repos but they were on Lusignan land. They came over the bridge with Mr. Hares in front carrying a red flag, and he was stripped naked to the waist and there was some blood about him. This bridge where they came over near the Hindoo Church was about 200 rods on the south side from where we were standing. As they came over the bridge Mr. Hares came towards us into the hospital but this crowd turned to the back dam.\(^{70}\)

The people were carrying cutlasses attached to the end of 8-foot sticks, and Richards described one man as having “a bayonet or sword.” The police decided to act more aggressively. They made several arrests and scattered the crowd.\(^{71}\) The people were not deterred and the ruckus continued, much to Richards’ dismay. From the 10\(^{th}\) to the 17\(^{th}\), managers were unable to ensure work progress, a critical endeavor at this point because so much cane had been burned. Richards argued that the strikes continued because of “[t]he intimidation of gangs walking through the estate. I heard them blowing whistles for everybody to clear out, and, when I asked them why they were interfering with these people and would not allow them to work, a good many of them said: “Well, L. B. I. [La Bonne Intention] has stopped and [sic] Enmore has stopped and Lusignan will have to stop too.”

Lusignan Estates estimated that they lost 92 tons of cane and a prospective additional 250 ton loss off the crop for 1936.\(^{72}\) Richards believed that those who participated were “put up [to it]

\(^{70}\) “Evidence of Mr. William Henry Richards,” 95.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 95-96.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 96.
by some person or persons….” He insisted that the strikes were the result of “concerted
action.” He felt it was organized beforehand

…because it was so well done. They had everything cut and dried. [They] were not in
sixes and sevens by any means. On the 7th when the mob came over from Mon Repos and
the factory was stopped by confusion[,] a few I know joined up later with the mob from
Beterveragting and after that they acted together. 74

When Lusignan finally returned to normal operations, workers received increased wages
and a new estate policy was enforced: management would price the work beforehand. In the
aftermath of these wins, however, several workers found themselves in jail, unemployed, and/or
removed from their homes.

“Slavery Done Long Time”: The Power of Myriad Voices at Plantation Farm

At Plantation Farm, many leaders came forward representing varied job categories of
plantation workers. It was here, at Plantation Farm, that two women rise to the surface of the
archives—one a driver (and the only woman out of 57 witnesses to testify before the
commission), and the other, a field worker, a “granny,” whose words are filtered through the
plantation manager. We do not know much about them, their identities, or the communities they
come from, but they are the only two women mentioned by name.

On October 15th, 1935, Sarah Thomas, 75 the driver in charge of the creole gang, 76 called
the manager of Plantation Farm. She had worked on the estate for 27 years. She reported that
“strange black men” were standing in front of the rum shop preventing people from going to
work. Henry Regany Barnwell, the plantation manager, immediately came to the scene, where he
found a mostly African crowd congregated. An ex-police officer-turned-sugarcane-forker, E.

73 Ibid., 111.
74 Ibid., 112.
75 Thomas was the only female driver to appear in the records associated with the strikes.
76 The “creole gang” was the group of small boys and girls who were usually responsible for manuring the cane and
gathering up bundles.
Barlow, stepped forward to demand an increase in remuneration, double the price, for the shovel gang: 5 cents instead of 2.5 cents per bed for fork moulding.77

When Barnwell told his workers that their demands were “impossible,” they started to yell at him, “[s]lavery done long time....” He described them as “excited” and “threatening in their attitude.” Later that afternoon, they were brandishing sticks and cutlasses and waving red flags. Other workers reported to Barnwell that they were chased out of the fields by “a gang of black men.” By the next day, the sugarcane fields of Plantation Farm were empty and several classes of workers were demanding pay increases, including forkmen and cane-cutters. Two overseers, listed as Mr. Wilkie and Mr. Austin, were assaulted and numerous acres of cane were burnt without authorization.78

Two days later, Barnwell described a mainly Black crowd of more than 300 people gathered on the public road who were “in rather an ugly mood and unable to reason.” They began to march to plantation Diamond. Rangers hired by plantation staff to put an end to the fires were forced to join the march and walk at the front while carrying red flags. Police officers tried in vain to stop the crowd from marching and taking over the street. The marchers went through two villages, Arcadia and Mocha, before reaching the next plantation, Diamond. This march in particular was a dramatic spectacle; the protestors not only commandeered hostages to lead their march, but also broke through police lines and took the march off the plantation, to the streets and villages, all the while drawing in supporters as they moved through with their red flags, cutlasses, and sticks.

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77 The shovel gang was comprised of men who were responsible for the half-banking and forking that followed the flood-fallowing of the fields. They also dug drains and packed the backdams that helped to keep out the water.
By the next day, the governor declared martial law. Troubled by the ways events had spiraled out of control as well as by the losses sustained from the strikes and the arsons, Barnwell agreed to a meeting with a delegation. Ramsaroop Maraj joined a small group of worker representatives that agreed to meet with District Commissioner Norton and Barnwell, to try to negotiate a settlement. All of the workers demanded an increase in pay. When he eventually met with them, the various workers had chosen representatives from among their ranks. The weeders, puntloaders, muleboys, creole gang, shovermen, and forking gang all had their own representatives and all demanded at a minimum double their current earnings.

Jerome Pierre came forward to represent the cane-cutters. He argued that “the price was very small” and “the work was getting harder and harder.” Eleazar Barlow spoke for “the black forking gang.” Harry Ram represented the creole gang, which on this plantation was the youngest gang on the estate and mostly East Indian. Soobrian Singh represented the Black and East Indian shovelmen. Abdool Azez represented the puntloaders.

A young worker, listed only as Ramcharitar, represented the boy gang, complaining that their earnings were “insufficient.” When asked about him, the manager declared dismissively, “[h]e is a boy.”\(^{79}\) Ramcharitar demanded increases for cleaning trenches, moulding, and changing banks, as well as for weeding tasks. Plantation manager Barnwell explained that for weeders, Ramcharitar wanted “the price be raised from 40 to 64 cents for men and 40 cents for women. Women now get 32 cents and the boys 40 cents.”\(^{80}\)

There was one woman at this meeting, Rebecca Peters, who was described as “an old granny.”\(^{81}\) She noted that it was not fair that she had to weed and clean the trenches at the same time. To ensure that the trenches functioned properly, a largely female and child labor force was

\(^{79}\) “Evidence of Mr. Henry Regany Barnwell,” 179.
\(^{80}\) Ibid., 161.
\(^{81}\) Ibid., 162.
hired to weed them. This meant climbing into the trench’s muddy waters—along with the fish, snakes, and other wildlife that populated these trenches—and pulling out the weeds that grew wildly. Garbage also piled up and limited the effectiveness of the trench, which made the work doubly odious; hence Peters’ commentary.

There were several other representatives at this meeting. Randolph Lynch represented the task gang weeders, and he argued that “the price was too low, especially given the price of food.” Sookra spoke for the mule boys, demanding a pay increase and complaining that the work day for this class of workers was entirely too long. Sometimes, he claimed, they worked for 22 hours, a fact disputed by Barnwell when questioned about this by the commissioners. Ganga Charran spoke for the cross mule boys who were responsible for pulling the mules in and out. He too complained of long hours and low pay.

Barnwell refused to increase anyone’s pay. With the power of the colonial state behind him, he summarily dismissed all of the complaints. The next day, the magistrate swore in sugar estate staff and drivers as special constables, specifically charged to help keep the peace. 28 men from Barnwell’s estates were arrested for disorderly behavior and obstructing justice. Five of them were workers who lived on the estate, and the rest were seasonal laborers who worked on the estates but lived in villages.

Barnwell, quite sure of himself at least at the outset, blamed the strike on outside agitators who did not even work on his plantation, people whom he described several times as “black men” who “chased” people away from their work. The chairman of the Commission sarcastically asked him whether the agitators forced people to demand higher wages as well. “I do not think there was any dissatisfaction with the wages,” Barnwell stated. “They were working

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82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 162-163.
84 Ibid., 163, 165.
quite happily the previous week until they were put out by the mob. That mob that put them out was the whole cause of the trouble.”

Throughout much of his testimony, Barnwell maintained that the instigators were “outsiders,” yet he later conceded that some of the workers participated because “people are easily led and misled and I am inclined to think that being aware that ‘war was on’[,] they thought prices might go up.” From his perspective, the workers were simply taking advantage of the situation to see what they could obtain for themselves—their grievances were “not genuine.” The Chairman continued to find Barnwell’s testimony about outsiders puzzling: “Didn’t it strike you as strange that a lot of outsiders should rush on your estate and take up an attitude like that on something which they had nothing to do with?”

Despite his efforts, Barnwell’s own testimony belied his initial portrayal of the disturbances. His initial assertion that the protestors were Black outside agitators who forced people to participate gave way to a description that was quite different; it eventually became clear that the individuals in question had indeed been working on his estates, that both Indian and African workers were active, and that most people participated of their own volition. Whether Barnwell believed them or not, the protestors believed that their grievances were genuine. Barnwell’s response reflected the unwillingness of some in power to hear, respond to, and respect the position of labor.

This strike in particular demonstrated the local leadership that emerged during the strikes, via the men and one woman who came forward with their demands representing various sections of the workforce. Jerome Pierre, Eleazar Barlow, Harry Ram, Soobrian Singh, Abdool Azez, Ramcharitar, Randolph Lynch, Sookra, Ganga Charran, and Rebecca Peters collectively came forward, demanded change, publically voiced their discontent, and spoke their truth.

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85 Ibid., 171.
86 Ibid., 165, 171.
87 Ibid., 173.
Conclusion

Racial hierarchies in British Guiana were complex and developed as a technology of colonialism under slavery and indentured servitude through the auspices of colonial government and the private interests of plantation society. Over time, the categories of “African” and “Indian” became solidified despite the fact that there was much diversity even within these categories. There were differences in positionality and realities for workers that were fundamentally based on a racialized labor regime.

Despite these differences, in 1935 sugar workers were able to build a movement dedicated to increasing wages, bettering conditions, demanding dignity, and making their voices heard. The strikes of 1935 were cross-racial, cross-job, cross-region, cross-plantation, and led by workers living both on and off the estates. Although the strikes were multi-generational in character, they were also started by youth and marked by their heavy participation. Thousands of workers participated, making it the closest thing British Guiana had to a plantation workers’ movement.

The decentralized nature of the strikes, wherein dozens of local leaders emerged, demonstrated that worker discontent was pervasive. However, the years of work undertaken by the British Guiana Labour Union also came into play, as evidenced by their symbolic red flags and the attempted march to the capital that prompted the state of emergency.

The timing of the strikes, during grinding season, was strategic. Although planter staff, colonial officials, middle class allies, and journalists consistently referred to workers who were “unable to reason,” who had “gone crazy,” or who didn’t understand their own interests, the workers clearly knew what they were doing.
Participating in the strikes took a toll on many peoples’ lives. Many workers were arrested, imprisoned, and forced to do hard labor or pay significant fines. 97 cases, some with multiple defendants, were prosecuted.88 Those who were branded ‘ringleaders’ most likely had difficulty obtaining work thereafter. Given the economic pressures of the 1930s and the already severe unemployment and underemployment plaguing the colony, losing employment in the sugar estates was a particularly painful sentence to a person’s livelihood.

There were other costs as well.89 In many ways, resident estate workers found themselves particularly vulnerable to planter reprisal. The resident labor force served as an emergency line of workers in the event of strikes or other difficulties facing the estates. In several cases, planter staff attempted to bring in resident labor as a rescue workforce to prevent the cane from spoiling, but strikers forcibly kept them out of the fields. They were trapped between the guns of the police and their bosses on one hand, and workers with sticks and cutlasses on the other. When faced with those choices, in most cases, they abandoned their jobs. These circumstances meant that it was remarkable when resident labor either led the strikes or participated early on.

As I explain in the next chapter, there was much colonial elite racial anxiety about attacks on Europeans (reinforced by newspaper coverage), yet they were not the only targets of violence. Drivers of color were also targets of violence, and some workers also experienced violence at the hands of the police, or, more likely, at the hands of other workers. However, despite these incidents, violence was minimal and there were no fatalities. During a much smaller strike that lasted only five days in 1924, police opened fire at Ruimveldt when marchers tried to march to

89 Chapter 5 discusses the “costs” of participating in disturbances that challenged the status quo.
the capital, resulting in 13 dead and 24 injured. In both 1924 and 1935, police prevented workers from entering Georgetown, the capital, en masse. In 1935, Governor Northcote and the head police inspector both credited the restraint of the police, who dealt with the uprisings daily for two months, for the lack of violence.

As I highlight in the next chapter, interested observers could not imagine that Africans and Indians could develop a multi-plantation strike or operate cross-racially. However, workers demonstrated solidarity through their actions and their understanding of the need for job-specific representation. As a group, they challenged their positionality I Europeans living and working in British Guiana. These strikes demonstrate the historical possibility of solidarity in British Guiana. Solidarity is a process that must be remade over and over again.


91 Northcote to Thomas, December 7, 1935, AC3/138, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown. In some cases, it seemed that police were afraid. The government swore in 99 new police officers to deal with the strikes, and in several cases sugar estate staff was deputized as constables. It seems that the government may have been dealing with a largely inexperienced police force. I also think that Northcote may have been sympathetic to some of the workers’ grievances despite his rhetoric. Although two British newspapers reported that British warships were called in, I am not sure that they actually were. When the police inspector initially asked Northcote to have warships called in, he refused.
Chapter 4 – “I Thought the People Had Gone Crazy”: Circuits of Imperial Anxiety

Introduction

When the labor rebellions began on Leonora Plantation on August 30, 1935, no one realized that they would spread so quickly. Workers from other plantations joined in and the unrest travelled across the coastal regions of the colony. What had seemingly begun as a simple single-plantation strike grew to plague much of the country, and news spread internationally. By mid-October, the protests seemed to spiral out of control.

The plantation management, the government of British Guiana, the Colonial Office in London, and the government of British India all tried to figure out how the disturbances had started and had spread so quickly. Estate managers and overseers insisted that they had had no indication that their workers would strike and concluded that the blame lay with outsiders who agitated a contented working population. The local government in British Guiana feared disruption to the local economy and disturbance of the peace that could not be controlled, particularly if it spread into the capital, Georgetown. The Colonial Office in London was concerned due to the unrest that plagued other parts of the Empire. Meanwhile, the government officials from British India were concerned about the conditions facing their compatriots across the Atlantic. After all, only a few years earlier, they had considered creating a new colony of Indians in British Guiana.

This chapter explores the initial and competing interpretations of the strikes by the press, the governor of British Guiana, the government of British India, the Colonial Office, the local police, key labor figure Hubert Critchlow, and plantation staff. In particular, I examine what was at stake for various intermediaries and elites involved in shutting down, assessing, and/or
interpreting the strikes. Their responses to the disturbances highlight the racial and ideological anxieties of colonialism and governability. They also reveal differing stereotypes about and behaviors towards African and Indian communities. I also focus on the uneven dynamics of power in an effort to discuss colonialism, race, and labor relations in the 1930s—a moment in which the very character of British imperialism was in flux and contested.

In response to the disturbances that spread throughout the country in 1935, the governor initiated a commission to study why the strikes occurred and to make recommendations that resulted in a report in 1936. The appointment of the commissioners was a process fraught with tensions and politics that demonstrate the interplay between local administrators in British Guiana, the Colonial Office in London, the sugar elite, and local and foreign organizations. Ultimately, the commissioners found that for estate staff, the idea that Africans and Indians planned and executed a multi-plantation strike to fight for their rights and their collective self-worth was simply unimaginable. Prevailing colonial ideologies about sugar laborers that presented them as male, ignorant, and gullible to outside influence superseded the estate staff’s actual experience and knowledge of these working populations. These ideas also served to mute working peoples’ grievances, which provided a window into their concerns about dignity and survival and their ideas about the international moment in which they were living.

**Initial (Mis)Interpretations?**

The initial reports about the strikes give us some information about the attendant racial politics. On October 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1935, *The London Times* reported the following:

Unrest, particularly among East Indians labourers, on sugar plantations of Georgetown, British Guiana, has led to assaults on police and English overseers. The Governor in

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1 See *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into and Report on The Labour Disputes in Demerara and Berbice During the Months of September and October, 1935* (Georgetown: “The Argosy” Company, 1936), CO 111/739/1, National Archives of the UK, London.
Council yesterday proclaimed the east bank and east coast areas under the Summary Jurisdiction Ordinance.²

The article garnered attention in India, prompting a confidential letter from the Honorable Ram Chandra, Officiating Secretary for the Government of India (Department of Education, Health and Lands) New Delhi to the Colonial Office. He mentioned that he had read about “the unrest among East Indian labourers” and requested any information that the Colonial Office could furnish.³

The sitting governor of British Guiana, Sir Geoffrey Alexander Stafford Northcote, sent his own letter to the Colonial Office on the 18ᵗʰ of October. He offered to forward a dispatch about the unrest and gave his preliminary assessment. He claimed that initially he went directly to the Sugar Producers Association to obtain answers about why the people were striking, but their report “was of little value. Everybody is at fault except the management!” He found this claim dubious but believed that management were “generally a good lot,” albeit “behind the times” and imperfect.⁴ In fact, the month before, he had written the Colonial Office stating that he met most of the plantation management and was “favourably impressed” by them.⁵

Northcote alerted the Colonial Office that the strikes in question persisted for a few weeks. In some ways, he found the unrest quite familiar: “This is the third year running in which such strikes have broken out at this time,” he noted. He attributed the unrest in September and October to grinding season, when “labour thinks that they are at the best advantage I their employers.” However, he felt that these strikes were also fundamentally different from those that preceded them due to coordination and outside influence. He reported,

³ Chandra to His Majesty’s Under Secretary of State for India, November 2, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
⁴ Northcote to Beckett, October 18, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
⁵ Northcote to MacDonald, September 5, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
This unrest this year behaved very much like an infectious disease. One plantation after the other has caught it and most of them have exhibited similar symptoms, so similar that in some cases one cannot believe that the reasons given for striking are fictitious. This in my view points to the fact that there is outside influence at work[,] which is guiding these strikers to some extent. I do not mean any illegitimate influence; I think myself that it is the British Guiana Labour Union, who, so far as I know, sincerely believe that employers are making too big profits and labourers are getting too little pay.6

In his opinion, two things accounted for the “agitator’s success.” There was a “phenomenally high yield” in sugar crops, leading workers to expect that their wages would also increase. The second factor for Governor Northcote was the Ethiopian-Italian conflict that was brewing on the other side of the Atlantic. He reasoned,

The second factor is the very strong sympathy which the blacks have for Abyssinia as against Italy. This has led to a new feature[:] the combination of blacks entering upon estates and preventing labourers resident on the estates, mostly East Indians, from working even though they are willing to work.

He continued:

Last week a European Assistant Manager was assaulted and insulted and on Monday of this week an Overseer at the back of La Bonne Intention was so severely beaten that his wrist was broken. He was also thrown into a ditch, half stripped, and made to walk some miles back to his house. I believe the police have some of those who were guilty of this outrage. These episodes, which I attribute to the growing Italo-Abyssinian complex, showed a nastier turn in the minds of the striking labourers and rumours began to grow of an intention of a general strike which would very likely have included many workmen in this town.7

Unlike the London Times article, which portrayed the conflict as one primarily concerning East Indian laborers with assaults against police and the “English overseers,” Governor Northcote attributed the agitation to a Black workforce hoping for higher wages and agitated by the Italian aggression towards Ethiopia. These unruly workers, he surmised, were forcing Indians to stay off the plantations despite the fact that they wanted to work. The strikes, he said, were a crafty labor

6 Northcote to Beckett, October 18, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
7 Ibid.
strategy, since they had specifically timed their strike during grinding season, and the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU) was a driving force in the matter.

For the most part, both of the accounts above (*The London Times* reporting and the governor’s preliminary assessment) were accurate. Yet both accounts of the strikes missed the fact that there were multiple moments in the upheaval where Indians and Africans worked together.

In mid-October, the timing for both of these accounts, there was very little public information about the strikes outside of the plantations. The press in British Guiana refused to report on them in an attempt to keep the unrest from spreading. The initial idea, communicated in the *London Times*, that the strikers were wholly East Indians was plausible. East Indians constituted the majority of sugar estate workers and they certainly had a tradition of striking. However, Northcote’s contention that a Black workforce was responsible was also conceivable. Plantations also hired significant numbers of African workers, and many of them participated in the rebellions. In some cases, testimony from plantation managers described “black men” running around with sticks and cutlasses intimidating people. Yet Northcote’s inability to see the agency of Indian workers early on could have been due to colonial stereotypes about Black rabble-rousers and Indian docility that persisted into the 20th century—despite their own experience with these populations. Even when there was more information, in December of 1935, the Colonial Office’s J. S. J. Rootham bristled at the India Office’s request for more information, stating that there was “nothing to indicate that East Indians were concerned in these disturbances; indeed the evidence points the other way…and I think we might tell the India Office so….”

8 However, as the previous chapter demonstrated, evidence from 1935 demonstrated that grassroots leadership and participation in the strikes came from Indians and

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Africans alike. And, undeniably, workers of both races compelled other workers to adhere to the strike and cease work.

Governor Northcote’s assessment was accurate on other matters as well. The BGLU was certainly involved, workers strategically struck during grinding season, and they openly expressed their desire for increased wages. Northcote also correctly connected the unrest to support for Ethiopia. Although the press did not initially cover the strikes, they did report on the Abyssinia-Italian conflict extensively. Further, the governor heard stories of community anger about Ethiopia. Ethiopia was certainly on people’s minds, as well as concern about Britain being pulled into war.

The reactions to the rebellions by local and imperial officials highlight anxiety that grew steadily throughout the colony about anti-European sentiment. The 1920s and 30s was a time of racial consciousness spurred by organizations including Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, the British Guiana East Indian Association, the Negro Progress Convention, and the East Indian Congress. The ethnic press and religious organizations also played a critical role. International events, including the struggle for independence in India and other parts of the colonized world and Ethiopia’s struggle to remain sovereign, fueled racial pride. These dynamics increased White elite colonial fears that unrest could lead to their demise in a country where they were a dramatic minority. Yet even though the fires of racial consciousness were burning, they did not ignite a wide-spread desire to oust the British. They did, however, signal a population that was questioning their subordinate place in the society, their lack of a voice, their mistreatment, and, significantly, their inability to make a living in a country they deemed home.
Governor Northcote Issues A Proclamation

Northcote was a new governor in British Guiana. He arrived in the country in 1935 after serving in the Gold Coast. Prior to his Gold Coast assignment, he had been stationed in Northern Rhodesia and Kenya. He arrived in British Guiana on March 27, 1935 and was sworn into office on the same day.\(^9\) New to the context of British Guiana and the British West Indies, Northcote was initially hesitant to involve the powers of the state to deal with private labor issues. In fact, he felt that plantation managers were too quick to call in colonial police to deal with their estate disputes, believing that premature involvement of the police sometimes intensifies the problem. He would later reverse himself on this point. When pressure began to mount, police were called in swiftly with his approval. Concerned about the escalating situation, Police Inspector Bradburn implored Governor Northcote to call in the militia, but Northcote refused to do so. Northcote started to realize that the “agitators” were escaping punishment because plantation management, anxious to end their troubles, agreed not to press charges if the troublemakers left the estate. Eager to prove himself, he decided to uphold colonial authority, law, and order by invoking the power of the state.\(^10\)

Northcote wanted to issue a proclamation declaring a state of emergency on October 13\(^{th}\) but was discouraged by the Attorney General, Hector Josephs. Josephs felt that the unrest was limited to the estates, which were private, and therefore the strikes did not constitute “breaches of the peace in public places.”\(^11\) However, by October 17\(^{th}\), Northcote ignored Josephs’ advice and issued the proclamation, because he believed the situation had become untenable. He recounted the following series of events that led to his decision:

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\(^10\) Northcote to Beckett, October 18, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.

\(^11\) Ibid.
...large parties from the very large villages of Buxton and Beteverwagting began to invade the neighboring estates in order to deter labourers resident thereon from recommencing work, as they were willing to do. Accordingly, I issued instructions that such persons, and especially their leaders, should be arrested and prosecuted. This course of action, however, largely increased the likelihood of a serious outbreak of the peace, and when a few days later it was reported that on the estates on the East Bank, Demerara River, through which a public road runs through Georgetown, gangs were assembled with the purpose of marching on the town, I issued a proclamation dated October 17th.  

The proclamation, which enforced Title 10 of the Summary Jurisdiction (offences) Ordinances, Cap. 13, affected mainly two areas: the East Coast and the East Bank. The East Coast referred to plantations and villages scattered on the eastern side of the Atlantic Coast, while the East Bank referred to the eastern side of the Demerara River. These were the areas closest to the capital, Georgetown.  

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12 Ibid.
13 Villages and estates in these areas featured names that sometimes reveal the hopes of their founders and the diversity of colonization in British Guiana. Examples of village names include Success, Good Hope, Paradise, Diamond, Enterprise, Friendship, Providence, Industry, Beteverwagting, La Bonne Intention, Peter’s Hall, Ruimveldt, Nonpareil, and Golden Grove.
The newspaper also published all the provisions and punishments of Title 10. Damage to shops or buildings, assaults, throwing stones, carrying weapons (including “bludgeon, or stick exceeding half an inch in diameter”), and use of language that was “abusive, insulting, or provoking” could lead to $100 in fines or imprisonment for six months upon conviction. The penalty for destroying or tearing down notices regarding the proclamation would result in a $25 fine or two months in prison. Penalties of $50 or imprisonment for three months would be meted out to groups of five or more who “assemble together in a disorderly manner in any public way or public place in a proclaimed district or in any place adjacent to that way or place…” if they

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were asked to disband and refused to do so. The governor also retained the right to close “spirit shops” or any stores as he deemed necessary. If these shops did not comply, they too could be subject to fines of $100 for every day the shop remained open. Finally, peace officers were given the green light to arrest any offender who broke the rules of the proclamation. The general public was also called into service, risking penalties for refusal: “Everyone who, being so called upon by a peace officer for assistance, refuses to render assistance to the best of his power, shall, on conviction thereof, be liable to a penalty of fifty dollars.”\(^{15}\)

These provisions represented the attempt of the local government to assert its control over the rebellions and bring colonial power to bear against those who rebelled and any allies who may have been sympathetic to their cause. There was also an inherent tension. Was the colonial government an extension of the sugar estates? The hesitancy to issue a proclamation on the part of the Attorney General and Governor Northcote’s own efforts to limit the use of the colonial police in sugar industry disputes highlight this tension. However, in the end, apprehension about the increasing power of the protesters, the fear of disorder, the injury facing the sugar industry (the bulwark of the colonial economy), and elite anxiety about what they viewed as anti-European sentiment, would win out. The proclamation was announced and the colonial police force called in.

In addition to the proclamation, on October 20, 1935, the government called a meeting in Georgetown that brought together representatives of several organizations to deal with the uprisings at the sugar estates. These representatives were C.R. Jacob and A.E. Seeram of the BGEIA; T.T. Nichols of the Negro Progress Convention; H. Aaron Britton of the Village Chairman’s Conference; Hubert Critchlow and J. Lucie Griffith of the British Guiana Labour Union; and R. Ruben Baird of the British Guiana Farmers’ Conference took place in

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
Georgetown. From there, they decided to hold a town hall meeting of “colonists”, including legislators and the SPA, to discuss bringing “an early and peaceful settlement of the prevailing labour unrest in certain parts of the country… All the representatives present earnestly expressed the desire that the labourers in the affected districts would observe law and order and rely on their Organizations to do all they can to assist in ameliorating existing conditions.”16 The need to uphold law and order was a consistent response to the rebellions, even by those deemed as representatives of the people.

Policing the Mind: Banning “Subversive” Publications

To be sure, the very nature of rights in the colonies was severely limited at the outset. The colonial arm attempted to place itself in the center of daily life and those who lived beneath its rule often tested its boundaries. Even what one could read within the colonial setting was regulated. The Colonial Office periodically issued lists of banned publications for the colonies. Designed to curtail the spread of “subversive publications,” the Colonial Office would issue warrants to the Post Master General to “detain” all copies of particular publications that came through the mail headed toward the colonies. In 1933, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Philip Cunliffe-Lister, sent a list to British Guiana naming 35 blacklisted publications,17 including:

- L’Internationale Communiste
- The Red Labour Union International
- The Negro Worker
- Correspondence of China
- The International Negro Workers’ Review

16 Special thanks to D. Alissa Trotz and Kimani Nehusi for this reference. “Public Meeting in Town Hall on Tuesday: Legislators and Sugar Planters to be Invited,” The Daily Chronicle, October 20, 1935.
17 Cunliffe-Lister to Officer Administering Government of British Guiana, December 7, 1933, AC7/20, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown.
• *A Report of Proceedings and Decisions of the First International Conference of Negro Workers*\(^\text{18}\)
• Two pamphlets by George Padmore: *Negro Workers and the Imperialist War Intervention in the Soviet Union* and *What is the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers?*
• *New Bharat* (or Indian Front, published in London)
• *Indian United Front*

This list reveals several concerns on the part of the Colonial Office. Communist publications, writing that connected race and class, anti-imperialist literature, Indian nationalist and Pan-Africanist writing, and those pieces that detailed workers’ rights were all considered seditious. Cunliffe-Lister believed there was an increase in such literature in “certain Colonies” and articulated that the chosen publications fell into one of two categories: either they openly advocated breaking the law, or were “tendentious” in character.\(^\text{19}\) Other circulars would follow. The banned publications lists would expand and constrict due to international changes, publications going out of print, and in light of the fact that some publications that were formerly imported were now developed locally.

The 1934 circulated list included three enclosures:

**Enclosure I**
List of 13 publications including
• “What is the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers?” by George Padmore
• *India United Front*
• *The Negro Worker*
• *The Draft Platform of the Communist Party of India*

**Enclosure Iia**
List of 18 publications from the United Kingdom which advocated breaches in the law but were less obvious in their method including:


\(^{19}\) Cunliffe-Lister to Officer Administering Government of British Guiana, December 7, 1933, AC7/20, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown.
All publications of the League Against Imperialism (with particular reference to Colonial News)

Negro Anthology by Nancy Cunard, published by Wishart and Company.

Enclosure Iib
21 foreign publications that “are less clearly calculated to lead to breaches in the law…”

The Harlem Liberator
Le Cri des Nègres
All publications of the International Seamen and Harbour Workers
Umsebenzi. The South African Worker.

With these lists, the Colonial Office was trying “to prevent, so far as possible, their circulation through the post to the Dominions, Colonies, and India in particular.”20 India was of particular concern for good reason. At this time, British rule in India was under siege. Gandhi was gaining popularity and the countryside was literally exploding. Cunliffe-Lister noted in one of his correspondences that the government of India was struggling to keep “undesirable” or “dangerous” persons out. They asked other colonies to help them by not allowing people to travel to India who are part of “communist or other revolutionary organizations,” particularly those who participated in the League against Imperialism.21

By 1935, George Padmore—the Trinidadian Communist, Pan-Africanist, and former Secretary of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers—was singled out for particular attention. The Colonial Office was concerned about his formation of the Pan-Africanist Brotherhood along with Tiemeko Garan Kouyate, who was described as a “prominent French Negro Communist.” The struggle waging in Ethiopia was underway and the Pan-Africanist Brotherhood had already taken a stand. Cunliffe-Lister wrote, “[t]his organization has already issued a manifesto on behalf of Ethiopia, and it may be taken for granted that any

20 Cunliffe-Lister to Officer Administering Government of British Guiana, October 31, 1934, AC7/20, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown.
21 Cunliffe-Lister to Officer Administering Government of British Guiana, August 15, 1934, AC7/20, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown.
publications which it issues will be wholly undesirable in tone.” Therefore, all of their publications were banned across the colonies. On August 26, 1935, merely days before the launch of the strikes in British Guiana, a new publication was added to the subversive list: *How to Organise and Lead the Struggle of the Negro Toilers*. It was published in Denmark and edited by Charles Woodson, who also served as the editor of *The Negro Worker*.23

Publications which openly or more discreetly advocated Communism, African or Indian racial consciousness, anti-imperialism, and workers’ rights were deemed dangerous under British colonialism of the early 1930s because, by definition, they challenged the power of the colonial state and the legitimacy of British rule. The rebellions of 1935 in British Guiana took place in an international milieu that included a number of critical developments. The continued ripple effects of the Great Depression were felt throughout the Empire along with a rising tide of challenge to British authority.

In India, the late 1920s ushered in increasingly militant student and labor activism, and the decade ended with Gandhi finally signing on to *purna swaraj* (full independence) in December 1929.24 Earlier that same year, revolutionaries Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev Thapar and Batukeshwar Dutt of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association were imprisoned for the bombing of the Central Legislative Assembly in New Delhi in April. The early 1930s ushered in a series of civil disobedience movements that were ruthlessly repressed. The British tried desperately to safeguard a crumbling regime in India while being faced with a growing, albeit fragmented (with the help of deliberate British policy), nationalist movement.

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23 McDonald to Officer Administering Government of British Guiana, August 26, 1935, AC7/20, British Guiana Circulars from Secretary of State – Secret, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown.
In Europe, instability was the order of the day. The Scottish Nationalist Party was formed in 1934 dedicated to fighting for an independent Scotland. Hitler had already risen to power in Germany and set about reclaiming its lost colonies, and Mussolini’s aggression towards Ethiopia was threatening to pull Britain into war. The Abyssinian-Italian crisis was provoking strong reaction in Africa, from Britain’s colonies worldwide, and within the metropole itself. Communism seemed to be gaining currency, and across the Americas labor was openly revolting.

In their work *British Imperialism, 1688-2000*, P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins cautioned against the empire-in-decline post-World War I narrative. They argued that the 1930s was a moment where Great Britain reassessed its methods, yet remained firmly committed to reasserting and strengthening its imperialism. While the West Indies only appears in a few pages in this massive work, Cain and Hopkins argued that this region commanded special attention during the 1930s as a “show window” for British colonialism in the backyard of the United States. Regarding the disturbances that were spreading across the Caribbean, they wrote, “[a]s the Colonial Office recognised, the disturbances expressed in acute form, a level of disaffection that was present elsewhere too, and the government feared a reaction that would ignite the whole of the colonial empire.”

Britain was quite concerned about its image abroad due to anti-British propaganda and declining prestige abroad. In 1934, the Foreign Office created the British Committee for Relations with Other Countries, later known as the British Council, charged with promoting British culture overseas. It was an attempt at cultural diplomacy designed to support British political and commercial interests and to “illustrate that British society still had much to offer the

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world.”26 This concern about reputation and negative propaganda even impacted studies about British territories. The Moyne Commission was a royal commission sent to investigate social and economic conditions in the West Indies in 1938 and 1939 in the wake of the labor rebellions that traversed the region. When the report was completed in 1940, the British government delayed its release because they felt that their enemies could use the report as fodder due to the deplorable conditions it outlined in the colonies and its critique of British policy. The report was not released until 1945, after the end of World War II.

All of these developments meant that Great Britain was struggling to maintain control over its regional interests and those of the Empire. Policing the mind by banning publications was one way that the Colonial Office asserted itself across large swaths of territory globally. It was an attempt to stem the tide of ideas that, if put into action, threatened Great Britain’s place in the world. But the ideas they were trying so desperately to prohibit already had roots in British Guiana and manifested themselves through the actions and symbol choices of everyday people who chose to rebel in 1935.

As the King’s representative in British Guiana, Governor Northcote understood that sugar was the bulwark of the colonial economy and that unrest in that particular industry could be devastating for British interests in the Caribbean. Northcote’s initial hesitance to involve colonial police and call in the militia suggests that he may have wanted to de-escalate the situation and bring about a negotiated solution. However, he temporarily abandoned this idea in favor of reasserting colonial power, law, and order by instating martial law. As we shall soon see, he had a powerful ally in some of the press, who parroted the interests of the colonial government and local economic interests. However, they too tested boundaries.

The Daily Argosy Speaks Out

The day after the Northcote’s proclamation was issued, *The Daily Argosy*, the leading colonial daily newspaper in British Guiana, printed a spread of articles. The main headline read, “Labour Disorders on the Sugar Estates. Situation Takes Serious Turn.” Multiple sub-headlines read, “Two Areas Proclaimed by Government.” “People Warned Against Riotous Disturbances.” “Uneasiness Over Italo-Abyssinian War Suggested.” “Governor Appeals for Preservation of Law and Order.” A large cartoon exhibited sugarcane and empty punts on the canals in the background. Two White men were in the forefront of the image confronting a mass of shaded men and one woman, all ostensibly Indian. One of the White men was dressed as a police officer with his baton, high black boots, platooned pants, and white British pith helmet. The other man had a gentleman’s hat, a black jacket and tie, spectacles, a pipe in his mouth, and an umbrella hanging from one arm. His pants were rolled up to display patterned socks and black laced-up shoes. His briefcase lay next to him, inscribed with the initials J. T. R. His free arm was outstretched to the mass of men he confronted. They were barefoot men with sticks and cutlasses, workmen hats, and turbans and scarves on their heads. Two of the workers kneeled before J. T. R. and stretched out their arms towards him; the rest stood firmly with their arms crossed. Underneath the image was a caption with the title “Sound Advice.” The caption read, “John T (to striking labourers): Look here, this will do none of you any good. No work now means a smaller crop and less money next year. My advice to you is to go back to work and leave the Government to give you a chance to state your grievances. Believe me you will get it.”27 This image captured the position of the newspaper in profound imagery: a European upper-class voice, backed by colonial police, speaking reason to a mass of workers—barefoot, ignorant,

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and colored, subservient but also resolute—assuring them that government would intervene and listen to them, that a strike was against their own interests.

In the cartoon, there was one lone woman, a visual stamp marking women’s work as marginal. Although women were a significant segment of the plantation workforce, it seems that in plantation culture at this time, the importance of women’s labor was marginalized. In all of the contemporary reporting on the matter—in the press, the Commission report, government correspondence, and other documents—plantation laborers were largely envisioned and marked as male.

Figure 2. Daily Argosy Political Cartoon, “Sugar Estate Labour Disturbances”

In an editorial printed on the same day as the cartoon, the editors of The Daily Argosy admitted to suppressing publication about labor unrest in the past at the behest of the government. They argued that the newspaper was acting in the interests of the community at

28 Ibid.
large, helping to do their part in keeping the disturbances that had littered the British Guiana landscape from spreading.

Naturally we were only too willing to lend our aid to any effort having for its object the localization and the settlement with the minimum of delay of disturbances of this nature since, viewed from any angle, they are inimical both to the interests of the sugar estate proprietors and the labourers themselves, and also inimical to the general interests of the community as a whole.\(^{29}\)

However, on October 18\(^{th}\), *The Daily Argosy* broke its silence because the disturbances reached “ugly dimensions,” with labourers committing acts of “lawlessness” and “violence.” The editors, who often worked in concert with the colonial administration, felt the need to take their own stand.

…a stage has now been reached when in the interests of Colonial policy we can no longer suppress information on the subject or refrain from candid constructive criticism of it.

The newspaper mildly criticized the governor for insinuating that there may have been a “lack of understanding” between the employees and employers. They believed that there was no evidence that there was a “steadily increasing feeling of dissatisfaction” and blamed the unrest squarely on the shoulders of “instigators.” If there was any inkling of worker discontent beforehand, editors argued, plantation management would have dealt with it in an orderly fashion. *The Daily Argosy* reported that they had conducted their own investigation and were confident that wages had been steady for some time, thereby eliminating wages as an explanation for the actions plaguing the plantations. They argued for the “severest measures” against the agitators who caused these strikes.

Editors also carved out space to voice their disapproval of the governor’s suggestion that leaders, chosen by the laborers themselves, should discuss their grievances with the estate owners. This suggestion, the newspaper proposed, “shows an unfortunate lack of understanding

of labour conditions in this colony.” Instead, they suggested the creation of a commission to investigate the strikes and meet with workers after they returned to work. This act would bring the disturbances to a close because there “is no balm to soothe a grievance like that of sympathetic consideration.” The newspaper’s response to the governor’s suggestion raises a number of questions. Why was the governor’s suggestion—that employee and employer should meet to discuss the workers’ complaints—considered problematic? Was it due to ideas about recalcitrant employers, unreasonable employees, inability of both groups to negotiate, or were they arguing that the suggestion was simply naïve? The course of action that eventually won out was the creation of a commission to “soothe” grievances.

Yet, the newspaper also asserted that the strikes were not the result of serious grievances. Despite this allegation, the editors claimed that the government did not take “visible” preventative measures even though they were aware “of the unrest for some considerable time.” The editors expressed hope that the government would act swiftly and institute a commission. They concluded this particular editorial with a multiracial appeal to workers to end the strike for the benefit of the colonial economy.

Our concern in this matter is entirely from a colonial point of view. There can be no difference of opinion, be they Negro or East Indian, and the sugar estate proprietors, be they what they may, in [s]o far as the effect on Colonial economy of these strikes is concerned. On this point, every man, woman and child in British Guiana are agreed…No one race can exist without the other….The East Indian’s cause, the Negro’s cause, or the white man’s cause is each…the cause of the Press, and for that reason, we appeal to labourers to return to work under present conditions, pending full investigation of their cause….Labour defeats its own object by going on strike.30 The thread running throughout the analysis of The Daily Argosy was simply that workers did not grasp the consequences of their actions, and, further, that their actions were against their own self-interests. In this appeal, they argued that everyone, irrespective of race, should be united in

30 Ibid.
purpose to preserve the colonial economy and order. British Guiana’s “races” were imagined here to be East Indian, Negro, and European—erasing Amerindian, Chinese, and Portuguese. Ultimately, the argument held that plantation workers, staff, and owners had the same interests.

The assumption that workers, particularly Indian and African workers, were ignorant was prevalent among the colonial elite. Sometimes one could even find hints of this ideology within labor leadership. However, Chapter Three demonstrated that workers were not only aware of their own position within the colonial economy but also connected their interests to the international concerns of their day. In terms of tied interests, Chapter One discussed the ways in which the colonial economy was held hostage (and other industries were stifled) due to the sugar industry’s power and interests. The severity of this issue was not lost on the men and women who labored in the sugar industry. Elites, who demonstrated an interest in either diversifying the economy on the one hand, or developing other industries for the purpose of building their individual fortunes on the other, also understood the limitations of sugar monopoly. East Indians and Africans were also aware that their limited voice in government had been further curtailed due to the return to Crown Colony government in 1928. Indeed, everyone did not have the same interests. However, the editors were correct in one assertion in particular. If the sugar economy collapsed, the consequences would be serious. As the experience of the sugar industry collapse in the Essequibo region due to flooding in 1934 showed, all would be hit hard, albeit unequally.

The Daily Argosy did conduct their own investigation into the rebellions. In another article, they reported their findings from the four and a half hours reporters spent at three sugar estates on the East Coast—Ogle, La Bonne Intention, and Lusignan—“to obtain first-hand information of the labourers’ viewpoint.” At Ogle, they met a large number of labourers, “Negroes and East Indians….” In addition to the workers and estate staff, County Inspector

31 “Labour Disorders…” See section entitled “Argosy Representative On the Scene.”
Bevelle Jones, Pundit Ramsaroop Maraj, and the Hon M. B. G. Austin were present. When reporters attempted to speak to the strikers, they initially received no response. This silence was followed by “loud” protest “against the wages received which it was claimed were insufficient to procure the bare necessities of life.” Each group represented their demands: estate laborers, task-gang laborers, and cane-cutters.

Estate laborers stated that they received 2.5 to 4 cents per bed for forking and felt it was “most inadequate,” and task-gang labor clamored for increased wages as well: 4 cents instead of 3 cents for forking ratoon banks; 5 versus 4 cents for renewed banks; 14 or 13 cents instead of 10 cents for half-banking and planting cane. Cane-cutters wanted a fixed rate per bed cut instead of payment by punt-load (4 tons). They wanted $1.12 per ton versus their initial 80 cents or even the increase (received the week before) to 96 cents. Through the cane-cutters’ responses, we can observe that differing positions among workers mattered and were racialized. The newsmen reported that cane-cutters

alleged that their average weekly earning was between $2.40 and $3 and to achieve that they were compelled to leave their homes between two and three o’clock in the morning and return between eight and ten o’clock at night.

They further urged that unlike the East Indian labourers on the Estate they did not enjoy the advantages of free homes and medical service, but lived in the villages where they had to pay either house rent or village rates; also that they were obliged to work in their farms on Sundays to assist themselves and their families in seeking out an unenviable existence.

As mentioned earlier, cane-cutters were among the higher-paid workers. Yet, their living was also precarious. They were easily replaced since they were not tied to plantations, and they usually commuted long distances to work, causing them to leave their homes very early in the morning. They were often the first to suffer from work shortages during times of retrenchment. They bore the expenses of their homes, their medical care, plus drainage and irrigation in their
villages. Yet, what they perceived as the “free” “advantages” of estate laborers were also fraught with their own sense of precariousness and limitations. Estate laborers stood to lose the most quickly for participation in a strike. Their homes, land, and jobs were at the mercy of the plantation owners and staff. Plantation managers saw these services and concessions as “privileges” and openly viewed them as a way to tie people to the estate, a throwback to the indenture system. As one plantation manager, Reginald Hubert Payne, later testified,

We look upon these privileges as part of our labour supply and recognize them as such. We give them these facilities to encourage them to stay on the estate. It is simply an old system which started from indenture days and when immigrants became free we continued them to encourage the labourers to remain on the estate.  

When asked if these amenities were “philanthropic gifts,” Payne explained that the point was to have “people available in an emergency or at any time. We have casuals in the task gang from the villages who are paid exactly the same wages as resident labour and they work together in the same gangs.”³³ Although estate workers were also given preference for short-term work that became available,³⁴ living on the estate signaled a certain loss of autonomy. Also, estate housing, particularly the barracks, was often substandard and unsanitary, as multiple colonial reports indicated, most significantly the 1938 Moyne Commission. Further, even those on the estates sometimes faced issues of drainage and irrigation. At La Bonne Intention, another estate investigated by The Daily Argosy, workers stated that they too could not live on the wages that were provided. The estate workers in particular complained that they did not receive proper drainage for their rice and farming lands, and were therefore totally dependent on estate wages.

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³³ “Evidence of Mr. Reginald Hubert Payne,” 67
³⁴ Ibid., 73.
Their wages were fixed at “between seven and eight shillings per week as compared with their
cost of living which was placed at four dollars a week.”\textsuperscript{35}

At the last plantation that reporters visited, Lusignan, conditions had returned to an
almost normal state, but laborers from the nearby villages of Buxton and Beteweagting were
prosecuted for disorderly behavior. Although they did not conduct interviews on the East Bank,
another key area in the sugar strikes saga, \textit{The Daily Argosy} reported that all the estates there
except for Diamond plantation were still on strike. Estates within six and a half miles from the
capital Georgetown, including Houston, Ruimveldt, Peter’s Hall, Providence, and Farm,
continued to experience disruption. At Plantation Farm, strikers “paraded the roads with red-and-
black flags and the manager and overseeing staff had to keep indoors.” They also drove away
workers from Plantation Diamond that were brought to work and break the impact of those who
were striking.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Critchlow Calls for a Commission to Investigate}

As part of their investigation, \textit{The Daily Argosy} interviewed labor leader Hubert
Critchlow, General Secretary of the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU).\textsuperscript{37} Critchlow, who
was of African descent, was one of the early labor leaders and visionaries in the Caribbean. The
report about the interview published by \textit{The Daily Argosy} portrayed a labor leader on the
defensive, and printed in paternalistic style the ways in which they “reminded” him of facts or
challenged him. Critchlow, echoing workers, stated that the wages on the estates were
insufficient. The paper representatives challenged him: “It was pointed out to Mr. Critchlow that
the planters had spent $200,000 more on wages this year than last year and the actual rate had

\textsuperscript{35}“Labour Disorders…” See section entitled “Argosy Representative On the Scene.”
\textsuperscript{36}“Labour Disorders…” See section entitled “On the East Bank.”
\textsuperscript{37}“Labour Disorders…” See section entitled “Mr. Critchlow Interviewed.”
gone up; moreover, the difference between the weekly wages and the cost of living of each man was about 91 cents per week.” Critchlow replied, “[t]he labourers complain…that although more canes are being planted and the planters may have spent more than last year in extending their cultivation, their [the labourers’] wages are too low.” The reporters argued, “[b]ut we know that the labourers’ wages have been increased….” Critchlow replied that he could not speak to whether there was an actual increase or not, only that the wages were low and that the cost of food was on the rise. The article stated, “Mr. Critchlow was reminded of the improved housing accommodation and sanitary conveniences on the estates, to be bourne by the proprietor.”

Critchlow conceded that there were some improvements on some estates. But he continued to maintain that wages could not cover the cost of living. Clothes were certainly more expensive than in the past, he argued, impacting the workers’ budget. Critchlow racialized his broader comment about expenses: “The Indian of to-day wears English clothes which cost more. This makes it difficult to live and the question is whether the rise in wages is commensurate with the cost of living. It is claimed it is not.”

Resorting to stereotypes that had a long colonial history, Critchlow asserted, “[t]he Negro, though he can toil harder than the East Indian and earns more, still finds it difficult to live, his wages being insufficient, because of the same reason [increased cost of living].” He continued to expound on the experiences of those living off of the estates: “…the man who does not live on the estate finds it even harder as he has to pay rent and does not enjoy a free medical service.” He then argued that if indeed more funds were used toward employment, the increase was actually due to estates employing more people rather than increasing wages.

The debate continued and Critchlow called for an inquiry into the whole matter. He further suggested that imperial funds should be used to provide maintenance for “people who are
genuinely seeking employment,” because there was simply not enough work for people to have regular employment throughout the year. He continued to press the cause of sugar workers: “The fact that men should strike…is proof that the present wages, even though increased, are insufficient to live upon.” His proposal to use imperial funds for those who were unemployed or seasonally employed was ignored. However, his call (and a contrarily motivated Daily Argosy’s appeal) for an inquiry did not go unheeded. Their proposal actually stemmed from British colonial methods of resolving conflicts, ameliorating and appeasing mass pressure, and making decisions: appoint commissions to inquire into problems, produce a report, and make recommendations. From there, decision makers would make determinations as to the course of action to be taken. These reports were also used to push political agendas.38

Commission Politics

Almost three months after the rebellions began, the governor instituted a commission dedicated to investigating them. On Saturday, November 23, 1935, the Official Gazette announced the creation of “A Commission to Enquire into the Causes of Recent Disputes between Employers and Labourers on Sugar Estates.” The purpose of the commission was

(1) To inquire into and report on the causes which led up to and occasioned the disputes between employers and labourers on sugar estates in Demerara and Berbice during the months of September and October, 1935;

(2) To inquire and report on
   (a) the remuneration and other considerations paid and afforded to labourers on sugar estates,
   (b) the conditions of labour on such estates, and
   I the questions whether, and, if so, what adjustments in respect of the foregoing should be made having regard to the economic conditions of the sugar industry.

(3) To advise what measures should be taken in order—

(a) to obviate the recurrence of similar disputes,
(b) to bring about a satisfactory settlement of any similar disputes.39

Governor Northcote appointed the Honorable Attorney General, Hector Josephs, as the Chair. He also appointed Arthur Heyliger Hill, Esquire, and Frank Bayliffe Henderson, Esquire, to co-lead the charge.40 Northcote believed that Hill understood the conditions on the sugar estates and the “mentality” of the workers because he had worked as Immigration Agent-General for several years.41 Henderson was a member of the Incorporated Society of Accountants and manager of the Bauxite Company and his presence was expected to bring insight into wage disputes and work conditions. Northcote did not mention Hector Josephs by name, nor did he give explanation for why he was chosen as the Chairman. However, the Colonial Office would have been quite familiar with him. Josephs was a Cambridge graduate and black barrister from Jamaica who was seemingly one of the few West Indians to hold such a high post in the Colonial Service at this time. Against the strong and heavily racially-motivated opposition of then-Governor Graeme Thompson, the Colonial Office appointed Josephs as Attorney General in British Guiana in 1925. Josephs also had previous experience conducting these types of investigations, having served on the 1927 Constitutional Commission.42 Most likely, having a

40 Ibid.
41 In fact Hill served as Immigrant Agent during the 1924 Ruimveldt shootings resulting from a strike in which both Africans and Indians participated. See Clem Seecharan, “The Ruimveldt Shootings (1924): The Colonisation Scheme and African-Indian Relations” in Mother India’s Shadow Over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s, by Clem Seecharan (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2010), 168. See the latter part of this chapter for a brief discussion comparing the 1924 strikes with those of 1935.
42 Joy Lumsden, “All But Unique” – a Black Jamaican Lawyer in the British Colonial Service” (Paper presented at the Association of Caribbean Historians, Georgetown, Guyana, April 2-7, 1995), accessed January 28, 2014, https://sites.google.com/site/myjamaicanhistoryarticles/-all-but-unique---a-black-jamaican-lawyer-in-the-british-colonial-service. The existence of someone like Josephs raises questions about social mobility and race in colonial service in the British Empire, some of which are addressed briefly in Lumsden’s article. Clearly a color barrier existed. In 1933, C. L. R. James condemned color and racial discrimination in the colonial service. See C. L. R. James, The Case for West Indian Self-Government. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1933). The records of British Guiana are also full of testimony arguing for the Guianization of the public service and complaints that competent coloured men (and they were specifically discussing men) were barred from serving in the higher levels of
Black man on the commission could not hurt, given Northcote’s interpretation of the racial nature and Black dominance of the strikes.

However, Northcote came under fire for his decisions. The British Guiana East India Association (BGEIA), the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU), and the Sugar Producers’ Association (SPA) objected to the fact that they did not have representatives on the commission and presumably wrote to the Colonial Office. The Secretary of the London-based Indians Overseas Association also wrote to the Undersecretary of the Colonies protesting the formation of the committee. He argued that Northcote’s commission was illegitimate on the grounds that it did not have Indian representation, a significant problem given that the majority of the population on the estates was Indian. Further, he advocated for a Royal Commission, rather than a locally-based one, and believed that Northcote’s decisions would “help to intensify the unrest that has arisen in those Colonies [which he identified as the West Indies and Demerara] as a result of the present Italo/Abyssinian dispute.”

In defense of his position, Northcote stated curtly that he did not include members of the Sugar Producers Association nor the BGLU on the Commission because he felt that he would not get a useful report if the commissioners ended up in deadlock. This admission is interesting given his alleged proposal (mentioned above) to bring employers and employees together to resolve the disputes. Regarding the BGEIA, the BGLU, and the SPA, he suggested that they

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43 Honorary Secretary of the Indians Overseas Association to the Under Secretary for the Colonies, December 10, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
should simply testify to the commission and “leave it to a highly competent and impartial Commission to probe....”\textsuperscript{45} The Colonial Office initially expressed reservations about the decision to omit these organizations, but later concluded that a small commission “may really get at some relevant facts about wages in relation to costs on sugar estates – and will be able to weigh the facts dispassionately.”\textsuperscript{46}

The Colonial Office used the opportunity of discussing the appointment of the commissioners to gently (but critically) comment on the heavy sugar interests in the composition of the Legislative and Executive Councils in the Colony. Regarding the commission, they wrote, “we hope that it will reach some impartial and valuable conclusions.” The same letter continued, “[i]t is a little unfortunate…that so many members of the Legislative and Executive Councils have interests in sugar, but I suppose the reason is that most of the ablest unofficials in the Colony are interested in that industry.”\textsuperscript{47} Again Northcote found himself on the defensive. He responded with a lengthy defense of his choices:

With reference to the allegations that I am giving Sugar an undue share in the Legislative and Executive Councils, it is true that F. J. Seaford is an employee of Booker Brothers and is Chairman of the Sugar Producers’ Association and I brought him on to the Executive Council party with that idea in mind but also because he is the best informed man with regard to drainage and irrigation works in the Colony, with the possible exception of the Director of Public Works whom I did not re-nominate. Austin is senior Attorney of Curtis Campbell and Company and I regarded this further association with Sugar as a little unfortunate. On the other hand there were three Elected Members already on the Executive Council and I did not wish to give them four seats out of five.

Northcote also included Mackey, the Manager of Bookers Brothers, because “he is fully competent to deal with commercial questions other than Sugar, a side on which the Legislative Council is definitely somewhat deficient.”\textsuperscript{48} Bookers Brothers was a multinational company that

\textsuperscript{45} Northcote to Beckett, December 4, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
\textsuperscript{46} Rootham note, December 7, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
\textsuperscript{47} Beckett to Northcote, January 13, 1936, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
\textsuperscript{48} Northcote to Beckett, December 4, 1935, CO 111/726/4, National Archives of the UK, London.
owned the largest portion of the sugar industry, but also had multiple stores and industry interests in British Guiana. Crown colony government in British Guiana was less than ten years old; however, it had already resulted in a hardening of sugar monopoly in the colony and disenfranchisement of the small percentage of local Guianese who had previously had the franchise. Even the Colonial Office recognized this as problematic and opined on it, but chose not intervene.

This pressure that Governor Northcote received both from within the Colony and abroad represented the varied interests that attempted to influence critical decisions in 1930s British Guiana. Northcote found himself in the middle of a firestorm and had to constantly defend his decisions to the Colonial Office in London, displaying the challenges that local officials faced within the Empire—being held accountable by both a local population and the Colonial Office, but also being charged with enforcing the interests of Empire, and, at times, having one’s leadership usurped by seemingly disconnected and distant officials. However, in this instance, the Colonial Office seemed actually more in sync with the concerns of Guianese than was the governor, but they chose not utilize their power to act on their concerns. They also seem to have had a genuine concern at least about the appearance of fairness. In the end, the governor resorted to long-held British justifications of impartiality and competence to rule out the participation of certain organizations and, as we will see, to specifically exclude workers from positions of power.

The commissioners who investigated the causes of these strikes in 1935 interviewed 57 witnesses. They held 31 meetings and visited eight sugar plantations. Although there is no record

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49 Bookers’ advertisements appear throughout the newspapers in the 1930s in the auto industry, pharmaceuticals, clothing, a department store, etc. Later, in the 1950s, nationalists would refer to British Guiana as Bookers’ Guiana to highlight the influence that the British company wielded in local politics.
of the BGLU or the BGEIA being present at any of the meetings, members of the British Guiana Sugar Producers’ Association (SPA) were specifically mentioned as being “represented at all our meetings….” The SPA also sometimes participated in the collection of testimony beyond their own representation as witnesses. Of the many witnesses, 15 were called on behalf of the SPA. These included eight plantation managers, two overseers, and two drivers. The commission also called seven individuals to give evidence, including the Immigration Agent General, four district commissioners, and two non-commissioned police officers. They subpoenaed an additional 15 people, 11 of whom were estate laborers. They also received evidence from 20 volunteers, 10 of whom were laborers. Despite clear efforts to obtain testimony from laborers, workers were never in a position to question witnesses, a luxury afforded to and clearly used by the SPA.

The Unthinkable Strike

If the plantation staff that testified before the Commission is credible, the estates were peaceful before the eruption of the strikes. Managers had no idea that their workers were discontent or that they would participate in such an upheaval. Most of them stated there were no complaints beforehand (more honest ones described the complaints they heard as minor). Each one testified that they had a grievance process in place: time was set aside every morning to hear any challenges workers experienced. Even when plantations only a few miles away erupted, managers testified that they did not think that their workers would strike. The message from the

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50 According to historian Basdeo Mangru, the BGLU and BGEIA actually boycotted the sessions, but he does not cite this information.
51 See page 1-2 of Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into and Report on The Labour Disputes in Demerara and Berbice During the Months of September and October, 1935 (Georgetown: “The Argosy” Company, 1936), CO 111/739/1, National Archives of the UK, London.
plantation staff of the various estates was unanimous: everything had been working smoothly, they had no idea that their workers would strike, and were shocked and appalled when they did. Many of them repeatedly asserted that people outside the plantation had come in and caused problems; *their* laborers were content and wanted to work.

The commissioners had a hard time believing that none of the plantation staff knew the causes of the strikes, that they had no idea that “trouble” would come to their plantations, and that there had been no complaints beforehand. Over and over again, they would question and press each witness. The commissioners were incredulous about the idea that there was no indication of an impending protest and that workings on the plantations were smooth prior to the outbreak of the rebellions. When taking the testimony of the manager at Plantation Enmore, the chairman stated,

> What troubles me, Mr. Payne, is that all this must have taken some time and embraced a fair number of people. It does seem odd that no echo of it came to you or suspicion before it happened and that since, although they have all returned to work and things seem quiet now, you have not been able to ascertain anything in connection to it. This is what seems so peculiar to us. You see it was not confined to a small number of persons but the idea of raising trouble was general. You cannot account for it or help us further?\(^\text{52}\)

The plantation managers continued to insist that all was well before the “agitators” came. One overseer testified, “We heard there was trouble on both sides but the people were very contented and peaceful and we were hoping we would not have any trouble at all.”\(^\text{53}\) Career plantation manager, William Henry Richards, who had managed plantations for over thirty years, claimed he never anticipated this strike: “I had been watching very keenly because I had heard of trouble on other estates. I had heard of trouble at Enmore and La Bonne Intention, but I had no

\(^{52}\)“Evidence of Reginald Hubert Payne,” 62.

indication at all...”54 The manager at Plantation Ogle was also taken by surprise: “Honestly,” he exclaimed, “I thought the people had gone crazy.”55

The following extended excerpts of testimony taken from Plantation Farm manager Henry Regany Barnwell are particularly illustrative of the commission’s search for the truth and the tensions that rose to the surface between the commissioners and the local sugar elite. In this particular testimony, a representative from the SPA participated in the questioning. He is listed in the report as the Honorable H. C. Humphrys, Barrister-at-Law. This testimony also displays the stubborn insistence on the part of plantation staff that the rebellions were unexpected, the belief that the workers were forced to strike by instigators, and the challenges plantation management faced in obtaining reliable information.56

Mr. Humphrys (SPA representative): You told us that you had no previous complaint of any nature as regards wages. Had you any reason to anticipate that this trouble would arise at Pln. Farm?

Barnwell (Plantation Farm manager): No, everybody had been working quite happily.

Mr. Humphrys: Have you any reason for thinking what caused it?

Barnwell: The people were chased off their work by the black men.

Chairman (Commissioner, Attorney General Henry Josephs): Do you think they wanted more wages because they were chased off?

Mr. Humphrys: I suppose if you are chased off your work and made to demand these things you would do so….Do you know of anything that could have caused dissatisfaction on the estate?

Barnwell: I had no complaints; it was simply a case of the people being driven off their work.

55 “Evidence of Mr. James Sutherland,” 143, in Labour Disputes Commission, 1935, Evidence of Witnesses, 115-150, CO 111/739/2, National Archives of the UK, London.
56 In these excerpts, I have included the names of the individuals speaking for the purpose of clarity, but the quotes appear as originally transcribed, except when brackets or ellipses are used.
Barnwell argued throughout his testimony that Black men, most of whom he believed were unconnected to his estate, were forcing people to stop working. However, in his own later statements, he contradicted this idea by discussing various East Indian and African workers who lived on his estate and were making demands representing different classes of workers. At this moment in the testimony, the Chairman, Hector Josephs, was clearly unconvinced of Barnwell’s story. Humphrys, on the other hand, believed it to be quite plausible.

Mr. Humphrys: Did you consider that the demands they made… were genuine complaints and demands?

Barnwell: They did not strike me as being genuine.

Chairman: What do you mean by “genuine”?

Barnwell: I think perhaps they may have taken advantage of the situation and were just out for what they could get.

Chairman: What we want to get at is what was in your mind when you say the complaints were not genuine?

Barnwell: Well they asked for so much.

Chairman: Isn’t it human nature for people other than labourers to ask for more than they think they would get?

Mr. Humphrys: Even Government Officials.

Chairman: And they are controlled by Rules and Regulations, unlike some other professional men!

Again, the Chairman displayed skepticism about Barnwell’s testimony—the assumption that the complaints were not genuine because workers were asking for “so much.” Josephs saw this as a matter of strategy that all people employed. Humphrys, who asked the initial question about whether the complaints were genuine, used the opportunity needle Josephs about his status as a government official. Josephs quickly retorted by alluding to the ways in which certain
professionals seemed to be able to operate above the law and regulations, possibly a jab at the sugar industry. After a series of other questions, the commissioners returned to the subject of whether it was possible that Barnwell could have been blindsided by the strikes on his estate.

Chairman: You told us you had no anticipation of labour troubles on your estate?

Barnwell: Yes.

Chairman: Did they begin on any estate on the East Bank before they stopped working on yours?

Barnwell: No.

Chairman: There was some trouble at Houston: was that before yours?

Barnwell: Houston was first.

Chairman: What about Diamond?

Barnwell: Diamond had no trouble but they had a little trouble at Providence.

Chairman: Was that before yours or after?

Barnwell: At the same time.

Chairman: Did the East Coast struggles start before yours?

Barnwell: Yes they started in September.

Chairman: And there were some on the West Coast too?

Barnwell: Yes.

Chairman: Well, when these were happening did you have any talks with other Managers about them?

Barnwell: We hoped they would not come as far as our estate.

Chairman: A hope that was deferred for some time.

Barnwell: Yes.
Chairman: But while these things were happening on other estates did it occur to you that they were likely to be general? They did strike you that there would be a cessation of labour or a request for more pay?

Barnwell: It did strike me as spreading a bit but it did not strike me as coming my way.

Chairman: You knew the form it was taking in other places: requests for higher wages and the dismissal of officers who were unpopular. You knew about it?

Barnwell: It was difficult to get any information. There were all sorts of rumours.

Chairman: You did not have an opportunity of seeing other men who had troubles on their own estate?

Barnwell: No, they were too busy with their own.

The Chairman continued to press him with several other related questions, and stated,

Chairman: In view of the labour disturbance or discontent which was being evinced on the West Coast and on the East Coast[,] the authorities of these estates – the proprietors and attorneys – had probably taken counsel together with you[,] and as a consequence you were exercising more watchfulness and precaution than ordinary over your labourers to see their frame of mind. Is that right?”

Barnwell: That is right.

Chairman: Because undoubtedly you probably had a little fear that it might spread to your estate while you hoped that it would not?

Barnwell: Yes.

Despite Barnwell’s admission of fear, he continued to assert that he had no idea that the strikes would affect his estate. After receiving the same answer, the Chairman asked him one final time,

Chairman: And until the 15th October you had no inkling of any likelihood of trouble?”

Barnwell: None whatever.57

What made the rebellions in British Guiana at this juncture unforeseeable? Maybe the arguably self-imposed press censorship of strike coverage also impacted the planter class. Was

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estate staff truly unaware that the groundswell was approaching their doorstep? Why is it that even though plantations erupted only miles away, they did not believe it would happen on their estates? Is it that they thought their mechanisms of control were well set in place, or that laborers would not rebel during an economic depression in which there was a heavy surplus of labor? Was it simply that they did not think that workers in British Guiana had the capacity to organize a multi-plantation strike? Maybe they truly believed that their workers were content, that they had developed a rapport, and that someone would let them know if something of this magnitude was being planned. Or maybe anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s assessment about the planters during the age of slavery is applicable here. He wrote, “[b]uilt into any system of domination is the tendency to proclaim its own normalcy. To acknowledge resistance as a mass phenomenon is to acknowledge the possibility that something is wrong with the system.”

Indeed, something was wrong with the system, as the governor would hesitatingly acknowledge, despite the fact that he too dismissed some of the claims of the protesters.

**The Governor & Police Inspector Weigh In**

Writing to the Colonial Office in December 1935, the governor discussed the reasons workers struck and included a police report on the matter. He stated that District Commissioners visited the various estates to investigate the workers’ complaints during the strikes. Northcote praised their work: “They all gave good service in negotiations between the parties to the various disputes.” One major complaint was that wages were too low. Although on some estates, post-strike, workers gained small wage increases, Northcote explained, “in regard to the general rate

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the estate managers contend that the present price of sugar does not enable them to offer any hope of higher wages.” 

Another key complaint was that prices were not set beforehand. In the 1930s sugar industry in British Guiana, prices per bed were not fixed until the laborer was working. The governor wrote to the Colonial Office explaining, “[t]here are technical reasons which make this inconvenient [to set prices beforehand] to the management but it obviously prejudices the laborer, who is essentially a cutting contractor.” This was quite an admission by the governor. This opinion would later be edited out of his commentary on the matter.

On many estates, workers demanded that certain sub-managers and drivers be fired for mistreatment and abuse. However, Northcote completely dismissed the charges of abuse, labeling them “unfounded.” He felt they were only advanced “for this purpose of strengthening the strikers’ case.”

Finally, the governor and the police inspector contended that the war in Ethiopia influenced the strike in three ways: it contributed to an atmosphere of unrest; it drove a fear that food prices would increase; and it unleashed latent feelings of animosity towards Europeans in the colony. In his report, the police inspector wrote,

The general feeling of unrest has been intensified by the declaration of war by Italy against Abyssinia. Immediately it was known that war had broken out, certain of the strikers began to ask for increased wages. They appear to associate war with high cost of living and increased wages. This idea is supported by complaints made by certain of the estate labourers that the price of foodstuffs, etc., had been increased in the shops.

Although Governor Northcote acknowledged that in a few cases, food prices did increase, on the whole, he argued that the fear was due less to fact than to “recollections of what happened during

60 Ibid.
the Great War and to anticipation of the recurrence of such conditions in the event of an extension among European nations in the warfare in Abyssinia.”

Northcote further maintained that the war led to “unprecedented” Black participation in these strikes and racialized anger towards Whites in the colony.

These hostilities have, as you are aware, deeply disturbed the minds of the lower classes among the African-descended community here, a fact which serves to explain the unprecedented extent to which black people have played a part in these strikes. For a while, at least, every issue was regarded from the ‘colour’ point of view and the assaults and insults to which European overseers were subjected may be attributed largely to resentment against the action of a European nation vis-à-vis one situated in Africa.

The following statement in the police report about a rumor that circulated during the war highlights the colonial fear of racial animus towards Europeans, and indicated that these feelings existed beyond black communities:

The Italian-Abyssinian war served to intensify the situation by arousing racial feelings. There is no doubt that such feeling exists, and was recently evidenced in a disturbing way when a rumor was spread that Italians were visiting the schools in the Colony and poisoning the children by giving them poisoned sweets and in other ways. The credence given to this rumour and the resulting panic which ensued among the parents and children of the black and east indian [sic] races serves to reveal in a measure the feeling which exists among them.

Northcote believed that issuing the proclamation on October 17, 1935 ultimately had a “sobering effect” on the strike. The police inspector concurred, adding that “…sentences imposed by the Stipendiary Magistrates” were particularly persuasive. Ultimately, these measures succeeded in preventing these plantation strikes from spilling their disorder into the capital city, Georgetown.

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63 Ibid.
64 “Copy of a Report from the Inspector of Police…”, 5.
65 Ibid., 5.
Northcote also issued a letter from the Colonial Office on the Abyssinian question that he believed “materially affected the general outlook on this matter.”

In a section entitled “Local Unrest Over Abyssinia: Governor’s Appeal to Sympathisers,” the multi-page article about the labor strikes in the October 18th, 1935 issue of *The Daily Argosy* included a letter from Colonial Secretary E. J. Waddington. The letter was also circulated in the districts. Waddington mentioned that the Crown was aware that the people of British Guiana were worried about impending war between Italy and Abyssinia. He assured the local population that Great Britain and her allies were taking steps to stop Italy from invading. However, Waddington issued a warning to those who were willing to step out of the bounds of law to demonstrate their support for Ethiopia:

> The situation is a very difficulty [sic] one for Great Britain and the other members of the League and is the plain duty of friends of Abyssinia to do nothing that will hinder the Governments in their endeavor to help that invaded country.

> In these circumstances the Governor hopes and believes that all who wish Abyssinia well will show their sympathy with her in the most helpful and practical way, that is to say, by a strict observation of law and preservation of peace and good order.67

Whether the letter had an impact in toning down the tenor of the rebellions is unclear. Certainly protestors demonstrated concern about the invasion. It is more likely that the proclamation and the attendant arrests had the desired effect of damping the fires of the crowds. Northcote was able to withdraw the proclamation by November 4, 1935.

Despite the number of workers and plantations involved, as well as the numbers of police called out to respond, violence was minimal. There were no fatalities. According to Northcote, three overseers “were severely beaten and subjected to humiliating treatment” and “a few” drivers and estate laborers were assaulted, resulting in one broken arm and “minor injuries.”

66 Ibid., 5.
Governor Northcote and the police inspector both credited the restraint of the police. The governor stated, “it was only by the exercise of great toleration and tact on the part of the [police] Force that violent measures were avoided.” Further, he mentioned that they “came through two months of exceptionally difficult duty” without any casualties.

The police inspector compared the outcome of this situation to the strikes in 1924. He wrote,

The tactics adopted by strikers on the various estates bear an amazing resemblance to those adopted during the 1924 strikes on the Diamond Estates., i.e., East Indians and persons of African descent banded together for a common purpose; disorderly mobs, waving red flags, beating drums, carrying sticks and cutlasses and behaving in a boisterous and unruly manner, threatening to ‘beat up’ anybody found working and cane burning. The district was proclaimed but lawlessness developed into a Riot resulting in thirteen people being killed and eighteen persons injured by rifle bullets.

By invoking the 1924 strikes, the inspector was attempting to demonstrate how well the police force handled the matter in 1935. Although tactics from the strikers were similar, and in both cases a proclamation was issued, police supposedly exercised self-control and averted the calamity and tragedy that occurred in 1924. Yet the police commissioner’s commentary is striking for other reasons. In writing about the similarities between 1924 and 1935, he made an observation about 1935 that the governor had trouble acknowledging, namely that Blacks and East Indians “banded together for a common purpose.”

A brief discussion of the 1924 strikes may be useful here to help us begin to think through the importance of 1935. There is no consensus on the meanings of these strikes, which are usually referred to as “The Ruimveldt Shootings” or “The Ruimveldt Riots.” Clem Seecharan argued that the 1924 strikes (which ended in police shootings) actually seeded tensions and

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69 Ibid.
70 “Copy of a Report from the Inspector of Police…,” 5-6 (emphasis added).
distrust between Indian and African communities. Historian Julia DeBarros did not take a position on this but noted that “...historians of the 1924 riot address the role of organized labour, questioning whether or not the riots demonstrated incipient ethnic co-operation.” Out of the “riots” she examined (1889, 1905 and 1924) that had an impact in Georgetown, 1924 was the most “diverse” one, comprised of both African and Indian workers. Her primary interest in examining these events was to trace the Guianese cultural forms that manifested themselves and to argue that they represented a competing vision (against the colonial elite) over the meaning of public space, particularly in the streets of Georgetown. Guyana unionist Ashton Chase, author of the classic *A History of Trade Unionism in Guyana, 1900-1961*, demonstrated that African and Indian communities both participated as the strike brought together city workers and plantation workers, but focused on the ways in which state machinery dealt with the workers in “firm and merciless” ways.

For historian Clem Seecharan, an earlier proposal for the creation of an Indian colony in British Guiana was the backdrop to the events of 1924. Although neither DeBarros nor Chase mention this, Seecharan convincing argued that the Colonisation Scheme was “at the root” of the 1924 disturbances. Francis Kawall, the president of the British Guiana East Indian Association, held that a new Indian colony in British Guiana would depress wages, deepen stratification in Indian communities, and inflame tensions between Indians and Africans. Swelling inter-ethnic tensions were of particular concern given the fact that efforts (particularly by groups like the Negro Progress Convention) to promote parallel immigration from other parts

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of the West Indies or Africa had largely failed. African Guianese also responded to the Colonisation Scheme with cynicism. Seecharan contended that the Black response was connected to strongly held fears of being outnumbered by Indians.

Further, the sagging economy—due to a slump in sugar prices—affected all segments of labor. The BGLU attempted to organize dockworkers and other segments of workers in Georgetown, and pulled support from the surrounding sugar estates for higher wages. A Barbadian of African descent in the BGLU, Abrahams, organized in Indian communities and somewhat supplanted Kawall’s leadership. A joint strike was launched on April 3, 1924, with a march to Georgetown underway on April 4th. Chase and De Barros noted that plantation members were marching to the city to see Critchlow when they were violently stopped by the police. In De Barros’ account, she noted that workers were told that only five East Indians and five Blacks would be allowed to enter the city. Rejecting this proposal, workers tried to force their way past the police. According to Chase, Kawall and a Pandit tried desperately tried to convince the crowd to go home to no avail. Mounted police who tried to disarm the crowd met with stiff resistance and opened fire. Seecharan stated that police fired into a majority Indian crowd, killing 13 people, 12 of whom were Indian. 24 more were injured (no race of these are mentioned in any of the accounts). Kawall and Critchlow were blamed for the strike. For Seecharan, “Ruimveldt etched on the Indo-Guyanese imagination the belief that they were duped by Africans into the fatal march to Georgetown, at a time when the city was under martial law—it was not a manifestation of solidarity; it was treachery.”

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74 Chase quoted the BGLU 1924 annual report, which stated that the BGLU campaigned for “‘East Indians to be paid on an equal basis with other laboring people of other races in the Colony.’” Chase, A History, 67. Most historians describe the BGLU as an African-dominated union with most of its members hailing from the capital, however, Critchlow, who was of African descent, was a strong advocate for East Indian workers.

75 DeBarros, Order and Place, 162.

76 Chase, A History, 72.

77 Seecharan, “The Ruinvedt Shootings…,” 172.
Similar to the strikes in 1935, in 1924 workers used red flags, sticks, cutlasses, drums, dances, and music—all of which lends credence to DeBarros’ argument about the development of Guianese cultural protest forms. Also similar is the fact that contemporary observers argued that the strikes were the result of outside agitation—that workers had not struck of their own volition but had been riled up and even coerced by outsiders. However, in both 1924 and 1935, it seems that workers actively and purposefully participated, and provided leadership. I also believe (based on the evidence I have seen so far) that 1924 does indeed represent cross-ethnic cooperation through action, even if in the end, it may have also meant that some individuals used it or viewed the resulting police shootings as a reason for distrust between Africans and Indians. And, let’s not forget that those who were tasked with physically shutting down the strikes also saw both episodes as moments of cross-racial solidarity between Africans and Indians. However, the strikes in 1935 lasted for two months and did not result in death or terrible injury, particularly compared to the violence of the 1924 strike, which lasted for only five days.

By January 1936, Governor Northcote grudgingly admitted that there had indeed been East Indian involvement, and that East Indian workers had actively decided to participate. He promised to work with the SPA to resolve the issues that the rebellions raised. He declared that estate management needed to change with the times in order to avoid these types of issues in the future. He felt that if the plantations did not recognize the growing education on the part of East Indians, “and, unless they are prepared to readjust their methods of dealing with their estate labourers, it is certain that labour troubles will increase.” Months after the strike began and ended, Governor Northcote recognized what Hector Josephs and the Inspector of Police seemed to already know: that the sugar laborers recognized the power of collective bargaining, the power of strikes, and the potential of solidarity.
Chapter 5 – Seeds of Solidarity: The Aftermath of the Rebellions and Historical Possibility

Introduction

In this chapter, I devote significant space to analyzing the final report of the commission that was tasked with investigating the rebellions, as well as the government of India’s responses and suggested solutions to the plight of Indian workers. Ultimately, these discussions uncover the tensions of empire and highlight commissioner biases and their genuine efforts to ameliorate conditions. 1935 represents a moment when concerted action by British Guianese workers resulted in tangible changes in their lives. Nonetheless, their larger vision was narrowed into a bureaucratic solution aimed at minimizing conflict. Those who participated also faced consequences; the regimes of punishment in the Caribbean were alive and well in the 1930s. Although the rebellion’s loftier goals were not realized, it was a moment in which protestors gained international attention and forced a response to their circumstances. This chapter also points to this moment as one of nascent solidarity and historical possibility.

The Commission Reports Back

The strikes of 1935 prompted Governor Northcote to appoint a commission designed to explore the why the strikes occurred and to make recommendations purposed to prevent future instability. The commission consisted of three lawyers: the Attorney General Hector Josephs who served as the Chairman; former Immigrant Agent, Arthur Heyliger Hill; and Frank Bayliffe Henderson, who was manager of a bauxite company and also an accountant.¹ In an attempt to create an impartial body and to circumvent potential deadlock and conflict politics, the governor

¹ Regrettably, during the year-long process chairman Hector Josephs passed away due to an unnamed illness. Apparently, he approved the ideas that emerged in his report prior to his death. The outstanding work fell on the remaining two commissioners, the secretary Percy W. King, the official reporter B.D. McDougall, and a woman listed as Mrs. Adamson, who served as clerk for the attorney general and was responsible for transcribing all of the witness testimony.
excluded members of the Sugar Producers’ Association (SPA), the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU) and the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA) from joining the commission. The SPA still participated in the work of the commission and had access that the other two organizations did not. The commission held 31 meetings, visited 8 plantations, and interviewed 57 witnesses. In the report, which included descriptive and contextual information, the commissioners made one recommendation and proposed an urgent preliminary agenda.

Based on commissioners’ analyses, the grievances they identified seemed to fall into two broad categories: worker critiques of the plantation system and their desires for more sustainable lives. The first category included worker complaints about problematic management practices, mistreatment and working conditions. Under the second, workers expressed the desire for more autonomy, representation and an increased standard of living. Specifically, commissioners listed the following seven reasons for the rebellions: plantation management practice of not giving the price beforehand for taskwork, driver and overseer mistreatment of workers, employer practice of fines for irregular attendance “by labourers or their wives,” management changes in measuring punts for loading cane, low wages, workers’ desire for more provision and rice farming grounds, and long hours.

In examining the commissioners’ list of seven, one can glean their vision of who workers were and learn from their silences. Commissioners continued to envision the laborer as male—as evidenced by the line “by labourers or their wives.” Girl and single women workers seem invisible here. Married women, simply listed as “wives,” were discussed secondarily, not as laborers, but based simply on their marital status. They were often not included in the SPA counts of the number of workers on and off of plantations, obscuring the contributions of their labor.
The list of seven omitted racial injustice, even though commissioners were themselves obsessed with race in their interrogation of informants. Commissioners listed racial dynamics as a factor that created the atmosphere of the strikes, but did not list racialized grievances. Commissioners also did not include worker frustration about their lack of voice, lack of representation, and the lack of access to grievance procedures in their list despite the fact that these were clear factors in the strikes. In fact, workers rebelled because they felt that these were the only methods that gave them an opportunity to have their grievances addressed. They certainly recognized this as an issue even though it did not figure into the above list. It is possible that they did not grasp its centrality to the strikes because (as their solution to this problem would reveal) they did not believe in workers’ ability to articulate their own challenges (or solutions).

On average, the Commission reported that less than half of these workers, 41.30% were able to obtain work on a weekly basis. Of course, there were variations. For example, at the Rose Hall, 64.44% obtained work weekly, while at Ruimvelt, this number was quite low, 20.74%. As the commissioners acknowledged, the numbers above did not include female and child labor and therefore the actual number of laborers was higher than the industry claimed. The report concluded that due to the actual number of laborers and the percentages of those able to obtain regular work, “the supply of labour is in excess of the requirements of estates…”

The commissioners considered the question of wages seriously and asked many questions about this particular demand. In the end, they accepted certain elite testimony, such as that of Sir Alfred Sherlock, who argued that workers demanded more pay because they wanted the ability to attend the cinema. Commissioners expanded this line of argument and wrote that: “Labourers of to-day study the newspapers and are aware of the increasing demands of workers for a larger

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share of the ‘good things’ of life.” In spite of their own observations about workers studying newspapers, widely-consumed wisdom about worker ignorance and incapacity still dominated the discourse. They wrote that workers could not understand whether the sugar industry could actually afford to give them higher wages—it was “beyond the ability of the average field labourer in this Colony to comprehend.”3 The discussion about the cinema is interesting because in some ways, they believed it to be the major reason workers demanded increased wages, rather than the challenging economic conditions or the fact that workers could not obtain enough work to make a living.

Most likely the demands for increased wages were tied to a variety of motivations. For most, they demanded more wages due to dire need, others desired access to a higher quality of life, and for others, a sense of fairness was at the heart of their demands: if proprietors received an increase, or if they themselves worked longer hours, then they deserved higher wages. These were the reasons for wage increases that the workers themselves articulated. Of course there would have been other motivations as well, motivations that the record does not give us access to because they were never articulated in the evidence collection process, nor in newspapers.

At times, commissioners grudging attributed reasoned thought to workers. For example, the report used charts to demonstrate that cane production hit a record high in 1935. There was widespread speculation that the cane was heavy because the floods of 1934 enriched the soil. Commissioners deduced that due to the fact that workers actually saw that there was more cane, they assumed that it would mean more profits for sugar cane owners and that they had “a right to share in this apparent prosperity…” Yet, commissioners still argued that workers did not develop this belief on their own, they had support in cultivating this idea: “There can be little doubt also that the activities of the [British Guiana] Labour Union fostered a belief among labourers that

3 Ibid.
they were not getting a fair deal.” They noted that Sergeant Hughes testified that he heard Critchlow tell workers that harvest time was the time to hold out for better wages.4 The idea that if there was a windfall in profits and/or production, that those who were directly involved in production deserved a share in the spoils, has a long history in plantation laborer reasoning and action that extend beyond the 1930s.5

Leaning solely on reports from the British Guiana Sugar Producers’ Association (SPA), the report concluded that the sugar industry did not have the capacity to increase wages. SPA evidence showed record output in terms of sugar production, but dramatically low returns, particularly when one examined the returns alongside highly problematic estimates of capital investments. Experts called to be witnesses all testified to the infallibility of this statement, all using SPA projections. For example, Robert Redvers Follet-Smith, a “Chemist Ecologist,” was called to testify before the commission. Follet-Smith presented two graphs that covered the 15-year period 1920-1935: one represented the export value of sugar and the other detailed the yields of sugar per acre. He argued that there was a dramatic increase in yields of sugar production per acre (almost doubled between 1920 and 1935), but a decline in the actual value per ton on the world market (from $240 per ton to about $120 per ton in the same period). If we trust these numbers, they were indeed quite dismal, but as commissioners continued to question him, he revealed that the export value figures did not include local sales nor ancillary products, such as rum or molasses.6

4 Ibid., 5.
Ultimately, commissioners became convinced that a general wage increase of any sort would deplete the sugar industry, and would be particularly grievous for smaller estates producing less than 10,000 tons of sugar. Their pro-industry stance on wages did not extend to worker hours. Citing the testimony of overseers, rather than workers, commissioners demonstrated that work hours for laborers were unduly long. They argued that once the Immigration Ordinance was abolished in 1932, there were no laws in the Colony dedicated to regulating workers’ hours. All fieldwork was paid by task and people worked as long as they needed to in order to complete the tasks.

Table 4. Sample Work shifts of Sugar Estates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of workers</th>
<th>Shift</th>
<th># of hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Puntloaders</td>
<td>5:00 AM – 8:00 PM</td>
<td>15 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muleboys</td>
<td>4:00 AM – 10:00 PM (or midnight depending on number of trips)</td>
<td>17-19 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canecutters (Berbice)</td>
<td>5:00 AM – 4:00 PM</td>
<td>11 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canecutters (Demerara)</td>
<td>7:00 AM – 5:00 PM</td>
<td>10 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creole gang (Children)</td>
<td>7:00 AM – 5:30 PM</td>
<td>10.5 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory Workers</td>
<td>5:00 AM – 9:00 PM</td>
<td>14 hrs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The commissioners concluded: “We feel the hours of work generally on sugar estates require investigation and adjustment.”

The commissioners also stressed the “lack of scope” for agricultural labor. They foresaw unemployment growing in the colony because on one hand, the population was increasing due to improved health and sanitation. Also, there were fewer workers returning to India. On the other

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7 Data is derived from information from Report of the Commissioners, 13-14. The hours are actually difficult to track because of the variations in plantation practice.
8 Report of the Commissioners, 14.
hand, they believed that the sugar industry would likely constrict. The future they envisioned was quite bleak,

The sugar industry which produces less than half of one percent of the world production of sugar and provides employment for the bulk of the labouring population of the Colony, is menaced by the unrestricted production of sugar the world over. The supply of labour is at present more than sufficient for its requirements, and the prospect of an expansion of the industry which would absorb any appreciable increase to the labouring population does not appear to us probable under existing conditions.  

The economic decline of the colony was already underway. They believed that the sugar industry would not expand given British Guiana’s small place in the global market. This global phenomenon put agricultural workers at a supreme disadvantage. The largest employer could not absorb the workforce it already had, much less a workforce that was expanding. Ultimately, throwing the fortunes of the colony to the sugar industry had been shortsighted. British Guiana—once seen as the “Breadbasket of the Caribbean”, the El Dorado of South America, and a sweet haven of Empire—had already become a colonial backwater.

In some ways, the commissioners’ report was strikingly sympathetic to workers, however their biases also informed their analysis and approach to the problems facing the people British Guiana. The report blamed the majority of the rebellions on a Black workforce, yet their attention to the plight of Black workers was summed up in one paragraph. They reported that due to the floods of 1934, Black villagers were in dire straights and as a result were forced to depend on the sugar industry for their livelihood in increasing numbers. East Indians provided significant leadership in the strikes and were active in large numbers, yet commissioners elided

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9 Ibid., 17.
10 The report noted that the East Coast Demerara was particularly hard hit by the floods of January 1934. The floods “destroyed farms and most of the livestock of labourers residing in that locality, left many in straightened circumstances, necessitating their being assisted by the Foods Committee for several weeks afterwards.” The government undertook sea defense building at Nog Eens, which helped provide employment for a couple of months for “principally Black Villagers…” That employment ended in March of 1935 and subsequently, many Blacks resorted to working in the cane fields. Report of the Commissioners, 4.
their actions and did not see them as central to the disturbances. This oversight did not extend itself to the commissioners’ explicit focus on the needs and concerns of East Indian workers.

Despite the fact that workers of both races participated, and that resident and non-resident labor also participated, the overwhelming bulk of the commissioners’ commentary focused on East Indians and the resident labor force. In many instances in the report, resident and East Indian labor are seen as one in the same, most likely due to the fact that East Indians formed 90% of the resident labor population. There are several explanatory factors for the hyper-focus on the needs of East Indian workers. First, one of the commissioners, Arthur Hill, previously served as Immigrant Agent before the office was abolished in 1932. His considerable experience was brought to bear on the report, as one of two people who actually wrote the report and participated in the entire process. Second, several sections of the report were dedicated to the fact that the elimination of this position left workers without critical representation. Third, the commissioners believed that although indentured servitude was over, the remnants of the system remained. In fact, resident labor was a “relic” of the indenture system without the attendant protections:

What the indentured labourer was to the employer under the ‘indenture system,’ the resident estates labourer is to-day under the ‘Plantation system,’ but he is without the assistance, safeguards, and means of ventilating grievances, which indentured and un-indentured East Indians alike had enjoyed from 1836-1932…¹¹

They wrote that the defunct Immigration Department functioned as “Protector of East Indian labourers” until 1932.¹² Under indenture, the proprietor was required to provide full-time work, steady wages without deduction, decent housing with drainage and water protection, hospital access, medical care and medicine.¹³ Finally, due to worker fear, commissioners were unable to

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¹¹ Report of the Commissioners, 5.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid., 10.
obtain testimony from resident labor without compulsion. Consequently, throughout the report, there is particular sympathy for resident labor.

There are other less generous explanatory factors for commissioners’ predisposition towards resident East Indian laborers. As mentioned in Chapter Two, there was an assumption, based on historical circumstance and stereotype, that Black labor could protect itself, and that East Indian labor was more vulnerable. It is also quite possible also, that the prevailing anti-blackness of the British Guiana elite produced an inability to see Black pain and rendered Black subjects simply as violent instigators rather than people who had suffered significant loss during the floods of 1934 and were therefore dependent on the sugar industry as well.

For the commissioners, the disturbances occurred because some workers did not have previously afforded protections, and that all workers lacked representation and access to genuine grievance procedures. They concluded that managers were largely inaccessible to workers:

… admission by all Managers of estates who gave evidence before us that they had no knowledge whatever that trouble was impending on their estates, and that neither then nor since had they been able to discover the causes that gave rise to them, forces us to the conclusion that complaints of the inaccessibility of Managers to labourers are not entirely unjustified…\(^14\)

Commissioners stated that the lack of access to management was compounded by resident labor’s fear of being seen as ringleaders, fear of reprisal from plantation staff, fear of eviction from their homes and fear of losing their jobs when few alternatives were available.\(^15\) These concerns prevented many workers from speaking out about conditions on the estates. This inability to openly discuss problems with employers in part led to the powder keg that became the rebellions. By highlighting these concerns and taking them seriously, commissioners

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 16.
inadvertently pointed to a long-standing culture of fear and punishment that existed on the estates.

Although commissioners did not believe that evictions took place regularly, they perceived that the threat was enough to keep resident workers from complaining. Striking—rather than going to employers with grievances—seemed to be the only recourse. Commissioners further argued that resident workers struck, particularly when non-resident labor took the initiative, “under shelter as it were of having been intimidated into doing so …” 16 In other words, resident workers actively participated in strikes under the guise of being coerced. This salient analysis on the part of commissioners revealed worker shrewdness and strategy, and exposed the commissioners’ belief that worker discontent was serious and pervasive, rather than confined to a precious few.

Throughout their report, commissioners emphasized constantly that under the indenture system, the Immigration Ordinance protected East Indian laborers. The Immigrant Agent was ideally an advocate that represented individual laborers in disputes with employers, the legal system or other issues. The Immigrant Agent had a series of important duties: primarily to investigate complaints by or against immigrants, to enter any plantation and inspect all grounds including hospitals. He also had the right to bring complaints before the court and represent immigrants in proceedings and was expected to inform the governor of the situation of immigrants (both indentured and free). Sub Immigration agents were expected to visit plantations in their districts once per month and were supposed to have local officers in order to provide accessible support and advice.

Immigration Ordinance policies included maximums for work hours for different classes of labor, strict protocols for fining workers, procedures for delineating pay, protection from

16 Ibid.
arbitrary eviction from estate housing and regulations for housing and hospitals on the estates. The commissioners concluded that without government supervision, “irregularities have crept in…” For example, they pointed out that two of the major grievances in the 1935 strikes were arbitrary fines and not informing laborers of pay rates for task work beforehand. These were both offenses under the Immigration Ordinance.

The extent to which the Immigration Ordinance actually protected workers is debatable. First, it did not extend to all workers, only immigrants. Second, if the rebellions were in large part a result of the lack of access to grievance procedures, then the fact that strikes occurred while the Immigration Ordinance was in effect, should give us pause with respect to its import. Mangru provided ample evidence for decades of strike actions led by or including significant participation by East Indians prior to and after this period, dating from 1869. The ordinance was also restrictive for workers. For example, absence was a criminal offense, and indentures were tied to one plantation, unable to seek better pricing. Walter Rodney demonstrated in his work on the 19th century that indentured servitude as a whole tended to depress wages for all workers and awarded estate proprietors substantial control over the labor force. Further, we cannot ignore that planters frequently disregarded minimum wage requirements and important provisions for proper housing and medical facilities. These provisions were often not enforced by the colonial government. The ‘good ole days’ of indentured servitude never existed, at least not for the workers. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the power of the legal apparatus of the ordinance and the potential for redress that it represented. The best Immigration Agents were powerful advocates for their constituencies both with the sugar industry and the colonial state.

As legal minds, the commissioners pointed out that once the protections of the Immigration Ordinance were stripped away, workers were at the mercy of the Employers and Servants Ordinance, Chapter 261 of 1853, to which legal authority on resident labor reverted. For example, as of 1932, there were no policies regulating paylists. Commissioners recognized that while some managers were careful and followed the statutory requirements that dated back to the indenture system in documenting an individual employee’s earnings, work, and absences, other managers exercised “no great care” and “frequently enter the earnings of several persons under one name.” There was also “no legal right” conferred on any independent person to enter estates to check paylists for accuracy or to settle disputes. Housing and sanitation on estates were under the regulatory arm of the Central Board of Health (Ordinance 15 of 1934), but there were no longer any laws compelling estates to provide hospital or medical care.

Commissioners deemed the Employers and Servants Ordinance outdated and unfair. Under this ordinance, Chapter 261, employers were allowed to dock workers’ pay for absenteeism “without reasonable excuse,” up to 16 cents a day. They also had the right to evict workers from their estate homes for absenteeism with only three days notice. If the worker did not vacate in that time, the police or constables could legally forcefully evict the employee after three days. Although there was a provision in the law that allowed employees to have rights to their provision plots or rice grounds after their termination or eviction for a total of three months (from 6am-4pm daily), this provision was only enforceable if the laborer had a written contract proving that the plot was a part of his agreement with his employer.

The report concluded,

As no written agreements are entered into between resident labourers and Estate Authorities with regard to either free housing, or free grants of land for rice or provision
growing, it will be observed that either may be determined by 3 days notice on application being made to a Justice.¹⁹

Commissioners strongly recommended that the whole ordinance needed revision “in light of more modern conceptions of relations between employer and employed.”²⁰

Policymakers did not completely abandon all aspects of the original Immigration Ordinance. For example, District Commissioners were technically slated to undertake key responsibilities of the defunct Immigrant Agent position. However, as the report indicated, all of the District Commissioners, with one notable exception, were unable to perform these new duties due to lack of training and their already hefty workload. District Commissioners held responsibilities that conflicted with (or at least potentially posed barriers to) their role of supporting East Indian labor. For example, their roles as tax collectors quite possibly kept laborers who were delinquent in their taxes from approaching them for help.²¹

Commissioners noted that mediation was “strikingly absent in the disputes” because there was “now non-existent machinery” to pursue this option. This was due in part to the lack of a legal transition between indenture and freedom, and the profound absence of modern protections for workers. They acknowledged what they saw as “unequal” forms of representation and the uneven access to power for employers and employees: “That industry is highly organized and its interests are carefully protected by the British Guiana Sugar Producers’ Association while on the other hand labour is not in any way organized.” They correctly asserted that labor was not in a position to compete for the highest bidder because there was a major surplus of potential labor.

¹⁹ *Report of the Commissioners*, 12.
²⁰ Ibid., 16.
²¹ Ibid., 12.
employees.\textsuperscript{22} This commentary is critical because it acknowledged the power of King Sugar and its attendant organization.

Embedded within their understanding of the inequity of representation between the industry and its workers, was a profound insistence that workers had no organization and were incapable of representing themselves. In another segment of the report, commissioners expressed this point of view in a much stronger and condemnatory way:

The interests of the proprietors of the sugar industry are watched and protected by the highly organized Sugar Producers’ Association. On the other hand, labour is entirely unorganized, and is incapable of formulating its grievances in proper logical and reasonable form, and without the organized power which is necessary securing a reasonable and just consideration of its representations by the employers.\textsuperscript{23}

In this passage, they were reproducing age-old elite arguments about working peoples’ incapacity to represent and advocate for themselves in an organized, “logical” or “reasonable” fashion. The power and organization of the sugar industry was undeniable due to its strong influences and appointments in the tentacles of colonial government, reinforced by the return to Crown Colony government in 1928. However, during the labor rebellions of 1935, people certainly expressed their grievances extensively both through their words and actions. Commissioners did not admit that workers in British Guiana did in fact use the leverage to which they had access—the withdrawal of their labor, a strategy that workers at all levels across the world had legitimately used, especially during the 1930s. They also engaged in small and large acts of sabotage. Sugar workers in British Guiana organized enough to garner the attention of not only the sugar industry, local government, and the local press, but also from the Colonial Office in London, the government of India, the Indians Overseas Association and the international press. In fact, the investigatory commission that wrote the report had been set up specifically

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 16.
because workers had indeed been successful in challenging the power of the sugar industry and expressing their discontent.

Given that the commission struggled to appreciate the capacity of workers, it follows that their recommendation, while sympathetic, embodied this bias. The commission recommendations were regulatory in nature, focusing primarily on the role of colonial government in helping to prevent such disturbances in the future. Their proposal for the solution to the problem as they posed it, was that “government takes early steps to create some Authority clothed with such powers as are considered necessary for securing a reasonable and just consideration of its representation by the employed and employer.”24 They displayed a belief in rationality and impartiality. Their solution necessitated representation for employers, even though they previously admitted that employers were already over-represented and organized.

The commissioners’ recommendation for the increased role for government featured a new Labor Inspectorate. They advised that the Inspectorate maintain friendly contact with both constituencies as to ensure impartial settlements for disputes. Many of the pivotal roles that expired with the abolition of Immigrant Agent General were to be subsumed under this agency. They also proposed that the Labor Inspectorate regulate wages, negotiate between employers and employees, provide oversight of infractions committed by workers, and inspect worksites.

The commissioners also seized the opportunity to outline the preliminary agenda of the Labour Inspectorate. These items included dealing with the following issues: insecurity of tenure of estate housing; ensuring that task work should be priced before work commenced; instituting senior overseer inspections of incomplete tasks or work that was completed unsatisfactorily; establishing uniform paylists that documented earnings of each worker separately; initiating registers in order to document fines and deductions from worker earnings; investigations of

24 Ibid.
deductions made from husbands’ earnings (when employers felt that wives did not work sufficiently) and also those deductions called “house rent” when work was deemed insufficient; and pushing employers to inform field labor about the unit of time their tasks were expected to be completed.25 Their list did not include increased wages, any discussion of unions, nor racial justice. This agenda was a bureaucratic response to the plight of labor. On the other hand, it also revealed that even though the commissioners were supportive of the sugar industry, they believed that it needed to be regulated by the colonial government.

**India’s Response**

There were varied responses to the Labor Inspectorate proposal and the commissioners’ report. Of particular interest was the response from Indian officials in India. *The Times of India* reported that the Colonial Secretary of State assured the government of India that no action on the report would be taken until Indian officials weighed in.26

A memo sent from the Secretary of the government of India to the India Office in London and a confidential dispatch from the Colonial Office to the governor of British Guiana, provided initial responses from overseas and summarized India’s points with respect to the report on the labor disturbances. M.S.A. Hydari was a lawyer whose title was the “Secretary of the Government of India.” He sent his memo on the 12th of August in 1937 under the auspices of the “Government of India. Department of Education, Health and Lands.” He commenced by apologizing for the delay in response stating that they needed the time to carefully consider the report and the governor’s dispatch. Regarding the report, he noted that “the Government of India regard it as a fair and balanced presentment of the conditions under which Indian labourers work

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25 Ibid., 17.
on sugar plantations…” The bulk of his comments were targeted towards the governor and solutions proposed to avoid future disturbances. British India’s governing officials suggested that the Employers and Servants Ordinance and the Central Board of Health ordinances both needed to be revised to include the key provisions of the Immigration Ordinance that was no longer in force. They agreed with the creation of the Labour Inspectorate and Hydari wrote that the time for regulation of industrial labor conditions was at hand.

India’s government critiqued the Labor Inspectorate proposal arguing that its influence was too limited and that it needed enforcement power, including the power to initiate prosecutions. They observed that if the Inspectorate decided that labor conditions needed to be improved, there should be provisions in place to enforce its ruling. Settlements between employer and employed “by conciliation and consent” was not adequate. Hydari cited the Labour Department in Malaya as a model. The Malaya model’s success was due to its “considerable residual powers of compulsion.” He continued: “The Government of India believe that the principle involved is one of general application. Where the parties to a dispute are aware that ultimately the authorities with whom they come in contact are in a position to enforce their wishes or decisions by direct action they are all the more ready to effect a compromise.” He also noted that the charge of harsh treatment of workers by plantation staff had not been adequately addressed or rebutted, which made the need for the Inspectorate to have enforcement power all the more urgent. The ability to enter the estates, inspect and make recommendations would not be enough, “It can hardly be anticipated that as a result of the creation of the Inspectorate all employers and managers will immediately evince a practical interest in the welfare of their labours [sic] and to trust a voluntary acceptance of the recommendations of the Inspectorate…”

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27 Hydari memorandum, August 12, 1937, CO 111/739/1, National Archives of the UK, London.
28 Ibid.
India’s officials also felt that they did not have enough information to support the conclusion by both the report and the governor that wage rates should be left in the hands of the sugar industry, not to be interfered in by government. Therefore, they suggested that the Inspectorate should be responsible for compiling statistics on wages and cost-of-living, and be tasked with the responsibility of addressing any inadequacies with the colonial government in order to assure “equitable rates.” These investigations could provide the basis for a minimum wage or at least regulated wages in the future.

Indian officials also introduced the idea that the Labour Inspectorate should have power over worker hours and wage process, and they concurred with the commission about the problem of arbitrary wage deductions. In sharp stated disagreement with the governor who felt that the question of hours should be dealt with by individual plantation managers, the Government of India proposed that the Inspectorate should investigate worker hours and make recommendations for legislation. They argued that British Guiana should introduce legislation making it compulsory for employers to announce rates for work before said work was undertaken. Finally, they found the practice of arbitrary wage deductions as punishment particularly galling: “[t]he Government of India believes that any system by which an employer is at liberty to make arbitrary deductions from the wages of his employees who are in the main very much less educated is open to grave abuse.”29 The memo suggested either eliminating this practice altogether or providing very limited legal provisions for which wage deductions or fine impositions would be permitted.

India’s government officials argued that they should to be kept abreast of proposed legislation that would deal with the insecurity workers faced regarding their living arrangements

29 Ibid.
and the payments they made for garden plots. They also asked for the opportunity to examine drafts of any laws that had provisions regarding employers and laborers. As part of the conclusion of the memo, Hydari wrote: “The Government of India need hardly emphasize the fact that adequate protection of the Indian laborer and his contentment are the best safeguards against the recurrence of further labor troubles.”

Finally, there was one additional proposal that did not arise in the correspondence but was circulated in India itself. The rebellions of 1935 raised larger concerns about Indians overseas and spectators wondered aloud whether the government of India should appoint agents in countries “where Indians had settled in large numbers” to safeguard their interests. Such appointments would require consent from the countries involved, and this consent, one author lamented, “is not easy to obtain.”

The Under Secretary of State of the Colonial Office sent correspondence to British Guiana summarizing India’s positions and his own response to their commentary. His response was varied, but he frequently agreed with core observations from India, raising questions about which entity should be responsible or which ordinance would be affected. For example, he suggested that perhaps the newly proposed statistics bureau should have the responsibility of compiling information about wages and cost-of-living rather than the Labor Inspectorate, as India proposed. The Colonial Office also agreed on the need for more legislation to regulate the industry. (British Guiana’s governor was skittish on this point, he felt the need to confer with sugar industry lawyers before moving forward). The Colonial Office also supported further

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30 See page 2 of Summary of Government of India’s Observations and Comments Thereon, CO 111/739/1, National Archives of the UK, London.
31 Hydari memorandum.
32 “Indians in British Guiana.”
investigations into hours and pointed to a recent memo from the BGLU that raised this very issue.

The Under Secretary declined to consider other issues that Indian officials regarded as significant. As I noted previously, many of the conditions facing workers (particularly resident laborers) were remnants of practice and behavior engendered by the indenture system, yet he did not agree with India’s suggestion that the Inspectorate should use some of the provisions from the Immigration Ordinance. He argued that these provisions were connected to a defunct indentured labor system and were no longer useful. Therefore, contemporary workers should not receive the “benefits enjoyed” by those who were indentured in the past. Ironically, he did not refer to these contemporary workers as free or wage labor, he referred to them as “unindentured” labor, which suggests that the ghost of indenture continued to hover over the minds of colonial officials despite their protests that the system no longer existed.

The major objection levied by the Under Secretary was with respect to whether British Guiana’s colonial government needed to confer with the government of India regarding proposed legislation. While he welcomed their observations and promised “careful consideration,” he felt absolutely no compulsion to allow them to review legislation prior to enactment. His reason: any legislation would affect other parties “besides Indians.”

How can we understand the secretary’s assumption that India’s observations were only relevant when the issues pertained to Indians specifically? His reaction to Indian officials’ request to review proposed legislation was one that suggested that they had transgressed unspoken boundaries. When and where they could enter the conversation was determined by the Colonial Office, their input was unnecessary for colony-wide or multiracial issues, their perspective only considered with respect to Indians. British imperialism often perceived itself as
arbiter among diverse populations under its empire. Crown colony government had been partially premised on an implicit argument, a shade of which is present here: imperial input was necessary and impartial. In order to justify the need for crown colony government, supporters argued that imperial management would ensure equity, fairness and the common good, moreso than limited representative government. This understanding was part and parcel of the imperial contract. Also at issue would have been what it would have meant for the colonial government of British Guiana to agree to confer with another colony over its legislation, almost in an oversight capacity, supplanting the role of the Colonial Office. Despite rebuff on this particular point, Indian officials would continue to press their concerns and see themselves as advocates for Indians overseas.

**Results of the 1935 Labor Rebellions**

The leadership of the British Guiana labor rebellions was grassroots and represented many different elements of the plantation population. They garnered international attention, from London and India as well as other parts of the Caribbean. On many estates, shifts for factory workers were reduced from 18 hour days to 9 hour shifts. Most plantations ended the practice of giving the price for task work after work was started and were notifying workers of the price beforehand. Individual plantations also negotiated changes including wage increases and changes to particular working conditions. The importance of these various changes cannot be underestimated in a depressed economy.

On November 24, 1937, *The Times of India* carried an *Associated Press* announcement that a Commissioner of Labor was appointed in British Guiana. Citing the labor disturbances of 1935, the article stated that the “Government of India…attached considerable importance” to the recommendations laid out by the Commission of Inquiry and that this appointment was expected

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to “be received with general satisfaction in India.”

Probably the most significant development was the creation of the first Department of Labour. The impetus for the creation of the department came from the struggles of sugar workers in British Guiana in 1935. Their efforts also benefitted other workers given that this entity was responsible for workers across many industries in the colony. Historian Basdeo Mangru noted that Governor Northcote argued for the creation of a government body to negotiate disputes between labor and management in the opening of the first Legislative Session in 1935. The commissioners also proposed this kind of government entity in their report.

The Department of Labour was not actually created until 1938. Mangru connected the actual implementation of this proposal to the strikes that swept through Trinidad in 1937. He argued that the governor was in part motivated to act because of his fear that unrest would once again plague British Guiana. District Commissioner Malcolm Buchanan Laing was chosen as the Commissioner for the Department of Labor. He spoke Hindi and previously worked in the Immigration Department. Laing was expected to develop cost of living indexes for Georgetown workers, Indian estate workers and workers outside of Georgetown. He was also required to update the labor codes to include protections from 1891 Immigration Ordinance and maintain statistics for the Indian population including birth, death, marriage, and divorce. Ultimately, the department was designed to advise the government on its policy toward industry, labor and regulation of wages. The government of India and the BGEIA protested the lack of prosecutorial power for the Department of Labour. The BGEIA proposed an Indian Resident Agent-General

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36 Governor Northcote’s fears were justified. British Guiana erupted again on the Leonora plantation during the Moyne Commission’s visit in 1939.
for labor/management disputes involving Indians to be hired and paid by the government of India.\(^{38}\) It seems that this proposal fell on deaf ears and was never implemented.

In 1938, Indian officials sent J.D. Tyson to British Guiana to research the situation of East Indians in British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica. He was to use his findings to report to both the Royal Commission that was touring the West Indies and the government of India. In British Guiana, Tyson reviewed the work of the Labor Inspectorate. His conclusion about the recently-formed Inspectorate raised the same questions as his predecessors about the initial proposal. He argued that to be effective, it needed power to inspect and prosecute. He also urged British Guiana’s colonial government to announce minimum wages in all industries; provide land settlement for provisions, rice, and cattle raising; and to develop strong alternative industries to sugar to deal with work shortages and unemployment. He also noted that the sugar industry was dependent on preferences and subsidies to survive and therefore, the Colonial Office should independently review the industry’s (and subsidiary) accounts in order to understand “the real state of the industry.” He suggested that British Parliament should ensure that extra profits should be invested in improved wages and conditions (particularly housing, clean water and transportation on estates) since British taxpayers bore the brunt of the sugar preference bill.\(^{39}\)

Tyson stressed that the newly formed Department of Labour needed an experienced Labour Officer from England and an agent from India to deal with problems specifically facing East Indians.\(^{40}\) Tyson underscored that East Indians needed an agent of the Government of India, someone “who would be an friendly advisor both to the Indian community and the colonial

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\(^{39}\) “Position of Indian Settlers Overseas,” *The Times of India*, June 1, 1939.

\(^{40}\) He also discussed the issue of marriages. Requiring marriage registrations by those married through Hindu and Muslim rites continued to be an issue. He complained that failure to register should not invalidate a marriage.
Having an Indian official involved was critical not simply for East Indians in the West Indies, but for the complicated politics in the motherland. His report emphasized the challenge of public opinion,

Public opinion in India is extremely and increasingly sensitive about the treatment accorded to Indians in other parts of the Empire and is quick to hold the Government of India responsible for securing equal and honourable treatment for Indians overseas, especially those communities which owe their presence in the Colonies to the ‘indenture system’ to which the Government of India was a consenting party. Feeling in India is easily roused by reports of the grievances of these overseas communities.

He highlighted the problem of communication, including “imperfect telegraphic reports” or statements by correspondents that sometimes caused “alarm and tension.” This information, even if disproven, could be damaging, and the government of India would be pressured to respond to situations due to “excited public opinion”, hence India needed its own agent situated in the colonies. This agent could be an invaluable representative to East Indian communities, the colonial government, and the government of India.  

In October 1939, four years after the rebellions, *The Times of India* reported that laborers on sugar estates continued to complain about insufficiency of work and the “unapproachability of management and fear of victimization.” The article mentioned plainly, “[s]trikes have been common the last four years.” Workers were demanding minimum wages, tenure security, and reinvestment of sugar profits into housing and pure water supply on the estates. There was an upside despite the continuing challenges. The MPCA had already been founded was finally officially recognized by sugar planters after a serious labor strike in 1939. A new labor code

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42 “Position of Indian Settlers Overseas.”

43 Ayube Edun, an Indian-Guyanese, was a fierce advocate for Indian sugar workers from the late 1920s through the 40s. He served as secretary of the British Guiana East Indian Association 1927-28. Edun founded the Manpower Citizens’ Association (MPCA) in November 1937 as a representative and bargaining unit for Indian sugar workers because he felt that the Georgetown-based heavily African BGLU did not and could not adequately represent Indian plantation workers. He believed that Indians needed their own voice in the tradition of Gandhi.
was underway designed to provide minimum wages and give government power to require medical care on estates. The Labour Commissioner had also initiated a system for fixing standard wage prices for fieldwork.44

**Losses**

The costs for participating in the 1935 rebellions were significantly. To be fired or denied access to one’s means of livelihood was a major risk for all who participated. Those who lived on the estates could lose their homes arbitrarily. Those who continued to work were subject to additional abuse or denial of task work for their involvement. For those whose rage carried them beyond protest and into the realms of assault or damage to property, consequences were quite sure. As I demonstrated in chapters Two and Three, striking and broader protest were criminalized, and as a result, there were dozens of arrests and prosecutions.

Before the rebellions even ended, *The Daily Chronicle* reported extensively on arrests made shortly after Governor Northcote ordered the proclamation on October 18, 1935. Two days later, the newspaper announced: “During the past few days no less than 39 of the insurgents have been prosecuted…” The article informed the public that the magistrate had warned the “malcontents.” He told them that the “unlawful carrying of sticks and deadly and dangerous weapons to the terror an [sic] alarm of the public opened a person to the punishment of imprisonment and whipping.”45

Before the rebellions had quieted down, many workers were arrested and tried quickly by a magistrate. *The Daily Chronicle* published information about the first wave of arrests and prosecutions. While this newspaper did not address the totality of those who faced the colonial

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44 “Indians' Problems in West Indies…”
state for their involvement and leadership, it does help us to understand some of the sentences that were meted out by the state. The charges largely fell under the titles disorderly behavior and assault. There were also those who were listed as missing, as they fled prosecution. For example, police were not able to issue summonses to Triumph village’s Joseph Williams, nor Beterverwagting resident Clarence Mayers. I should note that the newspaper only listed the first names when the names were Indian-sounding. For English names—representing people that could also be of Indian heritage, the last names were usually listed and sometimes first and last names were listed.

At Plantation Lusignan, two unnamed people received 30 days of hard labor for assault. Six others received fines of $5-7.50 for disorderly conduct. At La Bonne Intention, four people were fined $7.50. Seventeen from La Bonne Intention and Plantation Ogle were put on probation for 9 months. Also at Plantation Ogle, Ganda and Persaud received 90 days in prison with hard labor for beating Dennis Rausch, the overseer. Ramnarnine, Nathoo and Laloo received 30 days in prison with hard labor for “aiding and abetting” in the assault. Three youth, listed only as Seenauth, Bhagoli and Karim were sentenced to 120 days in prison with hard labor for assaulting police.

As of October 20th, charges continued to flow to the magistrates. Nazir and Janwah were charged with assaulting Moonsammy. Triumph residents Queen Gibson and Ismay June were charged disorderly conduct. Beterverwagtings’ J. Pratt was charged with disorderly behavior. There were several arrests for the protests at Lusignan. Lusignan residents, J. Elliott, Leslie Garnett, Allan Williams, H. Thomas, Jonathan Campbell and Leonard Garnett were charged with disorderly behavior. Dan Pollard was charged with assault for attacking S. James. Buxton residents Dan Pollard, also known as Dan Koongie, and Alfred Douglas, also known as Tunney,
were charged with assaulting the overseer L.A. Hares. Buxton residents Joseph Sandy, Wilfred Douglas and H. Foster were charged with disorderly behavior. Mannie Murray and Wilfred Douglas of Buxton, were charged with assaulting Benjamin Stephan, the assistant book-keeper, and the muledriver, Sookwah. They were sentenced to 30 days imprisonment and hard labor.

Ultimately, 97 cases, some with multiple defendants, were prosecuted. In addition, 28 people were charged under Section 141 of Summary Jurisdiction (Offences) Ordinance, Cap 13, and 16 people charged for obstructing police business against section 32(b) of Summary Jurisdiction (Offences) Ordinance, Cap 13.46 During the 1935 disturbances, 99 police were added to the regular police force.47 Estate staff members were also sworn in as constables. Despite the need to employ more police, buses and transport for patrol, and rations—compared to the extent of the unrest—the cost was “negligible.”48 The police inspector extolled the police force for their tireless work under “trying” and “strenuous” circumstances.49 As mentioned earlier, there was no loss of life in this series of rebellions, an extraordinary circumstance given that other smaller and shorter rebellions in British Guiana did result in death and during the rebellions in the rest of the British West Indies during the 1930s, there were many fatalities.

Conclusion
The 1930s was a critical period of significant global change. Labor rebellions, anti-colonial struggle, social revolutions, socialist visions, new political alliances, challenges to a racialized global order and the beginning of World War II, all were manifest in the 1930s. What

46 “Results of cases prosecuted in connection with Labour disturbances on Sugar Estates during 1935,” AC3/138, Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown.
47 The total number of permanent staff in the police, prisons and militia was 882 (877 males and 5 females) in 1931. 38 of these persons were East Indian males, representing less than 5%. Government of British Guiana, Report on the Results of the Census of the Population, 1931 (Georgetown: "The Argosy" company, 1932), xxxviii and li. There are no numbers available for any other racial categories of the population in the section entitled occupations. There is a section of the census that specifically reports numbers for the East Indian population called “East Indian population.”
49 Ibid., 7-8.
happened in British Guiana in 1935 was an integral part of a changing world. In the Caribbean, change was in the wind. In some places, this change would come sooner than others, but people were fighting for a new day.

Regarding the question of labor, Constance Sutton has argued, “More than in most world regions, labour and the control over labour has shaped the contours of Caribbean societies.” She maintained that labor in the Caribbean is the “main social segment that has transmitted counter-hegemonic cultural traditions through time.”50 This argument can certainly be sustained for the 1930s, a moment that was constructed broadly but which manifested differently in different spaces in the region. As mentioned in Chapter Three, in the British West Indies alone there had been a number of serious protests before and during 1935. These included British Guiana in 1933 and 1934, Belize in February and October 1934 and again in November 1934, Trinidad in July of 1934, St. Kitts in January of 1935, St. Vincent in October of 1935 and St. Lucia in November of 1935.51

Cuba experienced dramatic strike actions in 1930, a short-lived proclaimed social revolution in 1933 and another series of strikes in 1935. Strikes were a constant feature of life in Puerto Rico during the 1930s, with discernable moments including 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, and 1938. In the Francophone Caribbean, marines would finally depart from Haiti in August of 1934, after 19 years of occupation, and Martinique had a series of hunger marches in 1935 led by sugar workers. In 1937, Barbados, St. Lucia and Trinidad all had serious labor disturbances. Although this catalogue pertains primarily to labor rebellions, we should never forget the level of

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bloodshed, racialized violence, and the profound and horrifying impact of the massacre of 20,000 Haitians, largely laborers, in the Dominican Republic in 1937.

Labor uprisings continued in 1938 with large-scale protests in British Guiana and Jamaica. And finally, the rebellions that occurred on Plantation Leonora in British Guiana in February 1939 would close out the decade. This list is certainly not exhaustive, nor does it highlight the only important events that occurred, but together these events dramatize the high stakes of this decade, and signal the fundamental shift in politics and life in the Caribbean. As Nigel Bolland concluded, “the rebellions achieved a shift in the political culture, as the working people of the British Caribbean made it clear that they would no longer be defined as merely cheap labour of sugar kings and oil lords….These people placed their demands for improved conditions at the centre of the Caribbean agenda, and their struggle for respect and a better life became the basis of modern Caribbean politics.”

What took place in British Guiana in 1935 offers us a different way to see the genesis of these politics. It does not provide a pre-history of the rise of key politicians in the nationalist movement, nor a teleological argument towards the history of nation, as is common in the analysis of this period for the British Caribbean. There is something horizontal, translocal, heterogeneous and unfinished about the struggle that took place on this mainland British colony. Similar to other places, however, the British Guiana story does demonstrate the ways in which imperialism and colonial government narrowed the vision advocated by working people. The 1935 struggle was about worker power and voice, better conditions, improved standard of living and economic justice. By challenging the legacies of enslavement and indenture that undergirded

52 Of the labor rebellions that took place in the Anglophone Caribbean, the most well-documented and well-known rebellions seem to be the 1937 labor rebellions in Trinidad and the 1938 Jamaica rebellions.
the plantation system, and connecting their experiences to international concerns of their day, workers were also calling attention to the profound racial inequalities that marked the colonial experience. The solution they received, however, did not transform the relations of power, but it did start the process of bringing British Guiana in line with modern protections for workers, government involvement in this process, and the recognition of unions by the SPA. It is quite possible that experience in British Guiana impacted the development of responses to later rebellions in the region. For example, by the time of the 1937 rebellions in Trinidad, the Colonial Office actively advocated trade unions as a response to the situation. Further, the issues raised by the workers of British Guiana in 1935 foreshadowed the findings of the Royal Moyne Commission of 1938 and 1939 that recommended wide-scale reforms with respect to economic and social policy in the British Caribbean.

I also suspect that an argument can be made that the youthful generation that emerged as leadership in the 1935 rebellions would play a key role as adults in the multiracial movement that led to the election of the Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) in 1953, a watershed in the history of British Guiana and the larger Americas.⁵⁴ Although the historiography that discusses the importance of 1953 is significant, we still do not have a true sense of the people who comprised the masses of nameless and faceless people who allowed for the rise of the PPP, or their motivations. Despite challenges to the meaning of the 1953 moment (noted in the introduction), it still holds a special place in the hearts of many Guyanese. As Cheddi Jagan declared, “…we were able to unite the people in 1953. That accounted for our big victory then.”

However, as Walter Rodney pointed out in 1966, “There is a tacit assumption that only in 1953 did mass involvement in Guyanese political affairs begin…” The story documented in this dissertation demonstrates otherwise. 1935 was a powerful moment of historical possibility. The

⁵⁴ See the introduction for a discussion of 1953.
context is critical. The British Guiana of the 1930s truly had a monocrop economy, and the colony’s development was guided by one of the stronger, more short-sighted and inflexible sugar plantocracies of the region. Therefore the impact of the Great Depression was severe with the market prices for sugar on the world market reaching an historic low. British Guiana had only recently become a crown colony in the late 1920s, unlike Barbados, which was never a crown colony, Trinidad, which had been a crown colony from its inception, or Jamaica, which became a crown colony after the Morant Bay rebellion in the 19th century, in 1865. The extremely limited representation Guianese had experienced was halted as a result of this change in the constitution. As a country below sea-level with an hydraulic environment, British Guiana had terrible working conditions, particularly for agricultural workers, but challenging for everyone. And the colony faced environmental crisis with the devastating floods of 1934, resulting in even more acute levels of unemployment and suffering.

Given the conditions that people faced and during a time of economic insecurity and environmental upheaval, people who were literally at the bottom of empire managed to create a force for social justice in 1935. This case study shows us something important about the making of diaspora and solidarity. These rebellions demonstrated a nascent politics of solidarity and active collaboration by workers who were living in a time of expanded diasporic consciousness and racial identity. In other words, strong racial identities did not foreclose the possibility of joint action. Further, in this country, infamously perceived as a place with historically intractable racial conflict between African descended populations and East Indians, the actors of 1935 point to a different history and possibility, an historical possibility that militates against zero-sum racial politics and one that remains infinitely relevant today.
In 1831, the colonies Essequibo-Demerara and Berbice (regions organized around rivers with the same names) were united into British Guiana. The country has a vast interior and rain forests, but the majority of the population lives on the coastal belt. This is also where sugar

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plantations were established. The colony was divided administratively into three counties in 1838—Essequibo, Berbice and Demerara. Sugar plantations in the Essequibo region were destroyed by flooding in 1934. The strikes took place in the Demerara and Berbice regions of the country. The West Coast and the East Coast refer to the settlements along the Atlantic Ocean on the western side and eastern side of the Demerara River, respectively. The East and West Banks refer to the settlements along the Demerara River, on the east and west sides.
Primary Sources

This study is heavily based on primary sources located at the following repositories: The Walter Rodney National Archives, the Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, the Caribbean Research Library at the University of Guyana, and the Caricom Documentation Centre, all located in Guyana; the National Archives of the UK, the London Metropolitan Archives, the British Library, and the SOAS Archives and Special Collections, all located in the United Kingdom; and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Benson Latin American Collections at the University of Texas, Austin, in the United States.

Manuscript and Archival Material
London Metropolitan Archives, London
Eric and Jessica Huntley papers

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York
Julian Mayfield Papers

The National Archives of the UK, London
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Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown
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