



Robert Waters and Gordon Daniels, “The World’s Longest General Strike: The AFL-CIO, the CIA and British Guiana, “ *Diplomatic History* (Vol. 29, No. 2, April 2005): 279-307.

Commentary by **Hugh Wilford**, University of Sheffield
Published by H-Diplo (www.h-net.org/~diplo/) on 19 April 2005

In 1994, the Clinton administration was embarrassed when the recently elected President of Guyana, Cheddi Jagan, took the unusual step of protesting its nomination for U.S. Ambassador to his country, William C. Doherty, Jr. As Jagan pointed out, Doherty had earlier held the position of social projects director in the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), an AFL-CIO training program for Latin American trade unionists which, so it was revealed in the late 1960s, had secretly received funding and direction from the CIA. In this role, Doherty had been involved in CIA-backed efforts to counter Castroite and communist influence in several South American countries, including what was still, at the time, the colony of British Guiana. What was more, such efforts had in 1964 led to the unseating of the then Guianese prime minister - none other than Jagan himself. It was not until almost 30 years later, in 1992, that Jagan would regain his position as premier, after his victory in what were considered Guyana's first truly democratic elections. The Clinton administration had not, it appeared, known about this unfortunate history (largely because of the shroud of official secrecy that continued to surround it) and withdrew Doherty's nomination, ordering the declassification of the relevant U.S. government records at the same time.

It is the story of Jagan's fall in 1964, and the CIA-inspired American labor activities in British Guiana which led up to it, that Daniels and Waters set out to tell in this article. Starting their account with President Clinton's abortive nomination of Doherty, the authors then move back in time to describe the complex pre-history of Jagan's rise to power in the 1950s. With its primary industry, sugar production, dominated by foreign investors, and its population bitterly divided between an African-descended minority and East Indian majority, British Guiana faced a number of obstacles as it began the journey from colony to independent nation. Jagan, the U.S.-educated son of an Indian sugar-cane cutter, became chief minister in 1953 after elections that were supposed to pave the way for British withdrawal. Instead, his adoption of Marxist economic policies provoked Britain into imposing military rule and throwing both him and his American-born wife, Janet Rosenberg, in prison. By 1957, however, Jagan was back in power, thanks largely to the backing of East Indian voters, whose support also won him re-election four years later. The British government, it seems, was so keen to divest itself of the expense of running the tiny colony that it was prepared to turn a blind eye to the Jagan administration's continuing radicalism.

Not so the U.S. government, which perceived British Guiana as a communist bridgehead on the South American mainland. American hostility to Jagan increased with the election of John F. Kennedy and the CIA's failure to depose Fidel Castro after the Bay of Pigs invasion. In February 1962, Secretary of State Dean Rusk wrote British Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home baldly stating the Kennedy administration's unwillingness to put up any longer with the UK's

indulgence of Jagan. As is revealed in a frank personal minute quoted here, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was infuriated by this intervention, accusing JFK of “pure Machiavellianism, “ but grudgingly agreed to cooperate with American measures to get rid of the troublesome Guianese leader. Thus began the CIA's campaign to destabilize Jagan by covertly sponsoring trade union activists opposed to his labor policies.

While emphasizing the Kennedy administration's relentless hostility to Jagan, the authors do not portray the Guianese politician as an entirely blameless victim of U.S. imperialism. Indeed, one of the article's most striking features is its skeptical take on Jagan's politics, in particular the authoritarian tendencies of his government's labor policies. Here, the authors perhaps stick too closely to U.S. labor sources that were bound to be critical of the Guianese government. Nonetheless, the attention paid to such factors as the indigenous causes of trade union opposition to Jagan, for example, the predominance of Afro-Guianese in the colony's civil service, is refreshing and welcome. So too is the authors' readiness to grant some independent agency to the AFL-CIO labor operatives involved in anti-Jagan activism, who were motivated as much by their attachment to the ideology of free trade unionism as obedience to the U.S. government.

For all that, the authors do acknowledge the importance of covert, official U.S. support for the anti-Jagan labor movement. This came from the CIA via, initially, Doherty's AIFLD, which since its founding in 1961 had granted assistance of various kinds to anti-communist unionists in British Guiana, then, after a general strike was called in the colony in April 1963, probably by means of American representatives of two U.S. national organizations affiliated to international trade secretariats: William Howard McCabe of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and Gerald O'Keefe of the Retail Clerks International Association (the authors do not view the documentary evidence in either case as absolutely conclusive). Back of the CIA's effort was the administration of John Kennedy, who maintained his pressure on the UK government to drop Jagan, even telling Macmillan during a meeting at the Prime Minister's country residence that the communization of British Guiana could lead to a U.S. invasion of Cuba and thence to World War III. “Clearly, “ the authors conclude, “President Kennedy was the force behind the intervention, not the CIA. “

This statement is more assertive than the evidence allows. Granted, Kennedy was clearly committed to the removal of Jagan, and records documenting the CIA's role in British Guiana are scant, but this does not prove anything except that the Agency has either destroyed the relevant files or refused to give up what does survive. Although reluctant to fault the authors on this score - they did, after all, consult archives in the U.S., Britain, and Guyana - I still wonder if there are not more publicly available records relating to the CIA activities in British Guiana than are cited in this article. The papers of McCabe's organization, AFSCME, are held by the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State University in Detroit, for example, as are the records of the American Newspaper Guild, another U.S. labor group linked with the CIA and active in South America. It might well be that the Reuther Library does not contain anything relevant to Agency operations in British Guiana, but it does at least seem worth referencing.

While on the subject of missed archival opportunities, it is a shame that (to judge again by the lack of references) the authors did not consult the records of the British Trades Union Congress, held at the Modern Records Centre, Warwick University. As the work of Peter Weiler has

shown, the TUC played an important part administering labor affairs in British colonies, and it would be reasonable to assume that Guiana was no exception. The organization's records should provide an interesting perspective on AFL-CIO activities on what British unionists would presumably regard as their turf (and, possibly, rumors about official U.S. funding).

Two other players in international labor politics missing from this account are the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions which, as Anthony Carew has demonstrated, was an important forum for conflicts between western national labor organizations in the decolonizing world during the early Cold War period, and American business, which exerted a powerful influence over such AFL-CIO initiatives as the AIFLD, not least through the ubiquitous presence of industrialist J. Peter Grace. Again, it might well be that neither had much bearing on the situation in British Guiana - Kennedy's concerns about Jagan do appear to have been ideological and strategic rather than economic - but, if so, a brief explanation would be helpful.

A few gaps notwithstanding, this is a conscientiously researched and lively account of a significant episode in recent international history. The use by the CIA of "intermediaries" such as labor groups, intellectuals, students, lawyers, women, missionaries, journalists, and other American citizens with links to strategic hotspots in South America, Asia, and Africa, was a major element in the U.S.'s Cold War effort and, despite the continuing unavailability of relevant official records, historians can still learn much about the subject from the papers of the private organizations and individuals involved.

Copyright © 2005 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo Article Discussion Co-ordinator, George Fujii, gfujii@umail.ucsb.edu.
