

Jerome Teelucksingh. *Labor and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 256 pages

Jerome Teelucksingh's *Labor and the Decolonization Struggle in Trinidad and Tobago* examines this nation's early labour organizations and trade unions from the 1920s to the 1950s. A particular focus is the Trinidad Workingmen's Association (TWA), later known as the Trinidad Labour Party, in the evolution of the colony's identity and culture. This volume tracks contributions to the rise of the well-known Trinidad and Tobago general strike of 1937 and subsequent cohesion building toward the Caribbean Labour Congress, an early advocate of Caribbean federation. The book is particularly strong in its survey of the impact of gender, religion, and the popular labour songs of these toilers, and how these labour organizations boldly advocated for them increasingly as a voting bloc.

Teelucksingh offers a nuanced view of multi-racial labour, observing Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian labour on their own authority. He offers perspectives on major labour personalities such as Arthur Cipriani, Krishna Deonarine (Adrian Cola Rienzi), Elma Francois, and Tubal Uriah Butler who are recognized to global acclaim outside the nation.

Teelucksingh also highlights personalities not given as much focus such as F. E. M. Hosein, Timothy Roodal, and C. B. Mathura. Hosein denounced Crown Colony government's racial logic as a benevolent despotism. Roodal condemned great wealth disparities and divisions even where fellow ethnics exploited "their own people." C. B. Mathura fought for Indo-Trinidadian workers to build multi-racial and distinctly Indian-oriented labour groups, instead of seeking colonial patronage or identifying with racial or religious chauvinisms in their community.

The TWA/TLP recognized women's workplace rights, mobilized their participation in public meetings and rallies, and defended women's right to vote. They exposed those in Trinidad and Tobago, who did not think women were politically mature. The author recognizes progressive similarities between British Fabianism and the TWA/TLP approach toward women, recording activists such as Cecilia Yearwood, Cecilia Urquart, and Mrs. Alkins.

Placing this crucial period of national history in conversation with regional labour movements found in Guyana, Grenada and Jamaica, Teelucksingh shows how the TWA wished for links with the British Labour Party to influence Crown Colony Government. An emerging party had little potential under imperial trusteeship without allies to influence the hierarchy in the metropole.

How do we take a measure of labour that appears uncompromising in opposition to capitalist government but functions as a loyal opposition? The best vantage for observing *Labor and the Decolonization Struggle* is not labour's search for legal status; rather, a culture chronicled in Teelucksingh's book that we might call *proletarian uplift*. This essence comes to mind as Teelucksingh discusses middle class trade union staffers who have shaped the labour movement through "service."

The nineteenth century discourse of racial uplift, that African and Indian elites shaped, spoke of the downtrodden as dirty, dangerous, embarrassing, and in need of culture. Labour movements were not always in opposition to such an outlook; the discerning reader grasps this through Teelucksingh's well-documented narrative.

Further, when we are alert to how labour songs fuse Christianity with socialism, and the language of degradation and martyrdom, apparently inspiring to those mobilized, we see animating "labour" as a politics of respectability that was both alert to the barefoot men and women, and at the same time was burdened by them and stood aloof.

Teelucksingh asks whether the unemployed and marginal toilers in Trinidad and Tobago understood fully the implications of labour songs which spoke of their blood and damnation? These labour songs do not elevate the explosive self-governing potential found in the 1937 Fyzabad strike, although Butler himself, like many anti-colonials, unevenly discarded the imperial civilizing mission that held coloured toilers in contempt. Teelucksingh explains Elma Francois's national unemployed movement and Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA) were major turning points in the colony's labour movement that desired to smash this mediation.

Did not a similar mission or sense of service exist between the British Fabians and the TWA/TLP? If the British Fabians were more democratic than the Tories, why did they not undermine Crown Colony Government? It is valid to conclude that sometimes they did, but plausible often they were racist and imperialist. This was not the best model for the Trinidad and Tobago labour movement.

I disagree with Teelucksingh that disputes among the labour movement in the conferences for federation leading up to the Caribbean Labour Congress, prevented a united front in opposing Britain. There was not great desire among middle class nationalists, who increasingly spoke for labour, for immediate self-government. Certainly they never thought of direct self-government for the masses, for the elite increasingly had the coveted positions, and saw workers below them most often like a colonial official. At times they articulated the call for greater human rights, but does not global capitalism conquer under this premise today? Federation must have had a pre-history in other colonial and anti-colonial administrative strategies.

In fact, as Antigua's Tim Hector has suggested, this early federation movement was negatively led by the middle class and blurred the lines between the workers' and decolonization movements. It is not that race or class is more important or some lynchpin. Rather, electoral politics contained what had previously been outbursts of the African and Indian unemployed and marginal toilers. Elma Francois, an Afro-Trinidadian, exposed this trend. Many others in the labour movement were satisfied with cheap Fabianism or could not see past it.

Perhaps in the 1930s the Trinidad working and middle classes could unite for a final moment against colonialism. But shortly after they did not belong in the same party. One

social class policed and repressed another in the name of a benevolent despotism.

Teelucksingh concludes that the working class, but overwhelmingly, he means the trade union bureaucracy and those who spoke before Parliament, had a prominent role in decolonization. When he speaks of “the true soldiers of the movement for responsible government” and “the scarred warriors for economic, social, and political liberation,” the author is referring to a separation of “the cadre of labor leaders who with the masses of the African and Indian working class...” expose unexamined problems that future rank-and-file, not trade union staffers, will have to unravel.

Matthew Quest