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Records of Organised Labour Activity in the Anglophone Caribbean - A Survey of Material Held at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London

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Introduction

This presentation looks at activities and records in and relating to the 20th century 'anglophone Caribbean'. Primarily, the documents originate in Trinidad, Jamaica and Guyana. Some of the materials are from the UK.

Six collections will be described, most of these are held in the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library and Archives. For this presentation, the collections have been divided into three groups. First, 'official' histories, that is to say works produced by governments, by organisations such as political parties, or by trade unions. These are, in the main, documents intended for public consumption, and present information about the organisation and their aims. Then there are private papers. These are two collections of papers donated to the Institute by Richard Hart and by C L R James. Last is an 'organisation' history, comprised of the records of the Commonwealth Trade Union Council (CTUC), donated to the Institute last year. The sorting and description of the CTUC records is at an early stage, and this presentation will give an indication of some of the types of material they contain.

Context

The starting point for this investigation is the events of the 1930s, and it ends with records from the first couple of years of the 21st century. There are a number of reasons for taking this starting point. Robert Alexander, in *A History of Organized Labor in the English-Speaking West Indies*, has argued that the disturbances of the 1930s form a turning point for the labour movement, and influenced the character of organised labour for the following 20 or 30 years (Alexander, 2004). From this period, there is a strong association of trade union leaders with leaders of new political parties. The labour and political movements both identified self-government as a goal and a means of achieving their social and economic aims. There was widespread support for a small group of charismatic leaders, who were generally middle class, and had been associated with earlier political or social movements in their countries.

The 1930s and 1940s were also marked by a shift in British policy regarding union organisation in the colonies. Earlier administrations, although not directly opposed to labour organisation, had viewed trade unions in the colonies with suspicion, and did not encourage colonial governments to recognise them. In the Caribbean, governments represented employer interests and those that passed legislation to recognise unions (for example, in Jamaica) were the exceptions. From the 1930s, and particularly following the Moyne Commission of 1938-9, governments were more strongly encouraged to introduce legislation to recognise and give limited support to unions.

There were also, from the end of the first World War, international influences on labour activities. Soldiers returning from Europe had experience of labour organisation; the creation of the USSR encouraged an interest in communism; and workers returning from the Americas and elsewhere in the Caribbean had come into contact with expressions of class and race politics (Knight, 2004 pp 69, 71-2). During the 1940s, the international context contributed to the growth of the strength and influence of unions in the region. Recognition of labour rights was an important theme of anti-fascism. The independence movement in India proved a source of encouragement and inspiration to self-determination movements amongst East Indian people, particularly in Trinidad and British Guiana (Bryan, 2004 pg 143). Labour leaders from the region were involved in the founding of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in 1945. Regional conferences of Caribbean labour leaders had started in 1926, and the formation of the WFTU provided the impetus for the

formation of the Caribbean Labour Congress (CLC) as a permanent body. The CLC promoted self-determination and federation for the British Caribbean, as a means to economic self-sufficiency (Alexander, 2004, pp 424-6).

The CLC, however, proved to be short-lived. Mistrust between western democracies and communist countries led to the split of the WFTU, and to the formation, by unions from the west, of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1949. This international division exacerbated ideological differences within the CLC, resulting in its effective end as a regional body the same year. Most of the unions previously affiliated to the CLC joined CADORIT, a Caribbean regional association affiliated to the ICFTU. CADORIT, and its successor, the Caribbean Congress of Labour (CCL), placed more emphasis on training programmes than on shared political action, and received most of its funding from the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) in the US.

Following independence, commonality of purpose between trade unions and the new governments disappeared. Governments sought foreign investment to promote economic, industrial, growth. To do so, they saw low labour costs as a means of attracting this investment. The situation worsened over the 1970s and 1980s, in particular as the rising oil prices contributed to global depression and a rise in interest rates. Where governments sought support from the International Monetary Fund, this came with restrictive conditions regarding spending and provision of social services. These conditions hit the working classes hardest.

At the end of the century, the situation varies across the region. Some countries have attempted to restrict the effectiveness of trade unions. For example, in Guyana, the PPP government was accused in 2000 of exploiting divisions between trade unions to marginalise the labour movement as a whole. International factors have continued as a major influence on collaborative activity, with the main resources of organisations such as the CCL focused on training and research to meet the challenges of a global economy and unfettered free trade.

Alternate approaches to labour history

So far, this description has taken into account the actions and intentions of governments, leaders,

parties, and trade unions. The validity of this approach to the history of the labour movement in the Caribbean can be questioned. Kusha Haraksingh outlined some of the arguments in favour of an alternative approach in the methodology volume of the UNESCO *General History of the Caribbean* (Haraksingh, 1999). He argued that there is a danger of mistaking the intentions of labour leaders for the aspirations of working people, and of mistaking policy and rhetoric for activity. Governments and Trade Unions are both practiced at producing print publications and at keeping records. The volume of this material, and the relative ease with which it can be found, can mislead and distort an understanding of working class experience. Writing about the strikes in Trinidad in the 1930s, Brinsley Samaroo chose to use two alternative sources of material: a collection of personal papers kept by Florence Nankivell, a supporter of social change in Trinidad, and the wife of a colonial secretary. The other, a fictional account written by an author who was also an eye-witness to the events (Samaroo, 1999). Samaroo chose these sources because they could provide accounts that would have been disregarded by official sources at the time, and that they could also express the emotional experiences, not reflected in the official record.

Alongside a description of the records, this review will also indicate how the collections can contribute to a deeper understanding of labour activity. It will also demonstrate where there are opportunities to identify aspirations, concerns and activities that have been under-represented in national or imperial accounts.

UK Parliamentary Publications

The first group of 'official' histories that I want to address are the parliamentary publications of the UK, in particular those from the pre-independence period. The Institute has acquired government publications on the Caribbean, either directly or through donations. Additionally, the Senate House Library of the University of London has a full collection of parliamentary publications covering this period. The reports commissioned for Parliament relevant to the study of organised labour include those relating to trade and production, and also those set up in response to the strikes in the 1930s. Chief among these are the *Report on Labour Conditions in the West Indies* by Orde-Browne, in July 1939, and the various reports arising from the West India Royal Commission, chaired by Lord Moyne. The latter took place over 1938-9, with some recommendations being published shortly after, and others being held over until near the end of

the war. The Moyne commission is particularly significant to the history of organised labour for two reasons. First, it recommended that all British colonies should introduce legislation to recognise trade unions. This was one of the recommendations released soon after the commission, and became British policy during the Second World War. Although a small number of Caribbean colonies had already done so, it created an environment in which popular support for trade unions could be more easily mobilised. Second, the Commission included in its participants Sir Walter Citrine, head of the British TUC. During the Commission's lifetime, Citrine met with a large number of trade union leaders, trying to encourage the growth of unions along a British model (Alexander, pg 13).

During the later 1940s and 1950s, UK interest in the Caribbean Federation is demonstrated through several reports and memoranda. These include: *Report of the conference on the Closer Association of the British West Indian Colonies* (1947-8 session); *Report by the conference on West Indian Federation held in London in April 1953*; *The Plan for a British Caribbean Federation agreed by the conference on West Indian Federation held in London in April 1953*; and several subsequent reports on legal and fiscal requirements of federation.

In addition to the specific reports noted above, colonial administrators prepared detailed annual returns, the 'Blue Books'. These can provide much background information on economic and social conditions, including: estimates of average wages by sector and costs of goods; numbers of voters; and the establishment of friendly and other benevolent societies. In addition to the Blue Books, the Colonial Office published annual reports on each colony (up to 1938 titled *Annual report on the social and economic progress of the people of ...*, afterwards just *Annual Report*). Although containing much less detailed statistical data than the Blue Books, these reports are very useful for their descriptions of labour relations, union membership, and the activities of Labour Boards, where they had been established.

Moyne Papers on West India Royal Commission - ICS 56

The Moyne papers comprise 68 items relating to the West India Royal Commission, donated to the Institute by the second Lord Moyne in 1980. The main part of the collection, 51 items, are

memoranda submitted to the Commission by interested parties in Trinidad and Tobago.

Amongst the submissions are 11 memoranda from labour organisations. These include trade unions, the Trinidad Labour Party, and intra-regional organisations (eg the Guiana and British West Indies Labour Congress). Interests expressed in the memoranda cover professional concerns, more general representations on working conditions, and calls for social, economic and constitutional change. An example of the latter can be found from the Trinidad Federation Workers' Trade Union. Their submission called for greater protection for Trade Unions, an expansion of the voting franchise, and for more effective implementation of rent controls.

The Legislative Council reported to the Commission on constitutional reform. This is particularly interesting as it also contains a minority memorandum from Adrian Rienzi, a member of the council and trade union leader. The text contains a clear example of the association drawn by labour leaders between self government and social change, and also of a commitment to federalism. Rienzi wrote,

unless there is a revolutionary change from Crown Colony Government to Self Government it would be difficult if not impossible to improve the social and economic conditions of the masses. It is desirable not only to grant Responsible Government to the colony, but to unite it with other Islands in the West Indies in a Union or Federation

(ICS 56/43; emphasis added in pencil to document).

These records reveal some of the unpublished voices behind the official report of the Commission. Although, in some cases, the memoranda originate from the leadership of organisations and parties, there are others that show the concerns of groups with different priorities. The memorandum from the Coterie of Social Workers focused on women in Trinidad, and made recommendations on education, employment rights, and childcare provision. There is also one memorandum from the Diego Martin Ward Ratepayers Association, and two calling for improved bus services to and from Laventille.

The National Archives holds a larger collection of papers and memoranda relating to the Moyne

Commission at CO 950. This is comprised of 961 files and volumes, and comparison of finding lists suggests that all the records in ICS 56 are also held in CO 950. The National Archives holdings also include the submission from Florence Nankivell.

Political Archives

The last set of 'official' records is a collection, built up by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, of ephemera from Political Parties, Trade Unions and Pressure Groups. Most of the items in the collection date from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s. The holdings are particularly strong for political parties in Jamaica and Guyana and trade unions in Trinidad (eg the Oil Workers' Union). Although there was a visit by the Librarian to the West Indies in 1964, the collection was mainly built up either through correspondence from the UK with organisations that could be identified, or by donations from researchers returning to the UK from the region (Millum, 2005, pp 3-4). Not surprisingly, the better-represented organisations are those that had a London office or London-based supporters, or that had an organisation that could print and distribute material internationally.

As well as materials relating to individual countries, the collection includes publications from intra-regional associations. There are records from the West Indian Federal Labour Party (series PP.NW.WIFLP), and Caribbean Congress of Labour (series TU.CC.CCL). Records from the earlier Caribbean Labour Congress (series TU.BB.CLC) include the official report of the conference held in Barbados in September 1945, that resolved to form the organisation.

The types of material held can be described as two categories: materials produced for specific campaigns; and policy documents such as manifestoes, constitutions, and member handbooks (Millum, 2005, pp 2-3). On the whole, the authorship is therefore from the organisation leaders, or from the administration of the organisation. The material is produced for presentation, either to the public, or to the general membership, or to influence a specific third party. Part of the value in the collection, however, lies in its ephemeral nature. Although some items in the collection are reflective and intended to form a historical record, most are produced for specific events, and some may form the only written report of an event (Millum, 2005, pg 16). The number of organisations represented is large, even if some organisations are represented by a small number of items, and

covers the smaller, as well as larger, states. These characteristics of the collection can be used as an antidote to what Haraksingh described as a *'flashpoint'* approach to labour history, that includes only the events that are written about in retrospect, or that provoke an official response, and that implies that the periods in-between represent inertia (Haraksingh, 1999, pg 306).

The collection is also valuable as a record of concerns and opinions being expressed without a priority to refer mainly to a UK audience, or to concentrate solely on UK influences. When referring to international influences, they are less likely to concentrate solely on issues of interest to the UK than other collections mentioned in this presentation. For example, they provide a clearer insight into local perceptions of US influence in the region.

A recent project at the Institute has catalogued all of the materials held in the collection, so that they are now all available, and can be searched from the library online catalogue, at <http://catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk>. A small selection of posters and pamphlets have also been digitised, and can be viewed in full from the project website, at <http://polarch.sas.ac.uk>.

Alongside building the Political Archive, the Library has included politics and labour activity within its general collecting scope. The result is that some materials, that could be considered within the Political Archives, can instead be found either amongst the general library collection, or in another archive collection. Where a particular party was in power, its publications, or publications written by its leaders, were more likely to be included in the main Library collection. Where an organisation has produced a regular newsletter, and the Library has been able to maintain a subscription, then this has usually been added to the periodicals sequence. The various newsletters of CADORIT and CCL are in this category, as are newsletters and publications from, or in support of, the New Jewel Movement in Grenada. The Political Archives cataloguing project has helped to reduce the problems that this could cause in finding this material, as all the records are now held on the same catalogue.

Other archives that hold related material include the C L R James papers (ICS 40), discussed later. There are also separate collections from the Barbados Workers Union, containing agreements on wages for plantation and factory workers 1952- 62 (ICS 138); and a file of material on St Kitts-Nevis independence, which includes comments and articles by labour organisations (ICS 98).

Private papers

The next two collections, of Richard Hart and C L R James, differ from those described so far, in that they contain some material that was not first intended for public viewing. Indeed, some of these exchanges were considered sensitive and marked 'not to be consulted' when they were first listed at the Institute. They are collections of private letters, working papers, and research materials, that were deposited by the individuals themselves, some time after they had moved to the UK.

It could be argued that both collections share similar characteristics with the 'official' records. Both writers are from middle class backgrounds, and had contact with the charismatic leaders of the 1930s and 1940s. Although of different opinion on a range of subjects relating to the Caribbean, both were influenced by socialist ideals, and this placed them in opposition to other labour leaders at times of their political careers.

Richard Hart papers - M861

Richard Hart was born in Jamaica in 1917, and trained as a solicitor. He was a member of the National Reform Association in 1937, and was particularly active in labour organisation. He was secretary of the Trade Union Advisory Council, president of the Jamaica Government Railway Employees Union from 1942- 8, and, in 1941, co-founded the Jamaican Youth Movement. Hart was also active in the international and intra-regional trade union movement, attending the founding conference of the CLC in 1945, and participating as General Secretary for most of that organisation's lifetime. Hart's political views placed him on the left of the People's National Party, and he left in 1952. However, he remained active in Jamaican labour and politics: becoming chair of the People's Educational Organisation; as legal adviser to the Sugar and Agricultural Workers' Union; and as treasurer of the Socialist Party of Jamaica. In the early 1960s, after a short period in Guyana, Richard Hart moved to England. It was after this time that he deposited his personal papers with the Institute.

The Hart papers are held at the Institute on microfilm, and the originals are now in Jamaica. They

are arranged chronologically, with additional folders relating to specific themes or organisations (eg the Jamaica Youth Movement and the People's Educational Organisation). The papers form an extensive record, covering activity from all the years of Hart's active political life in the Caribbean. Their contents include personal correspondence between Hart and other political and union leaders. There are press reports and letters and articles written to newspapers and journals (in particular from the *Daily Gleaner* and *Jamaican Times*). Publications, press releases, and notices from trade unions and parties are also included in the folders. Also in this collection are contemporary reports written by Richard Hart on the state of trade unionism in Jamaica, and in the West Indies in general.

The Hart papers are a vital resource for the study of the Jamaican labour movement in this era, capturing the timeliness of events, perhaps otherwise overlooked in retrospective accounts. They are also significant for the material relating to intra-regional and international labour activity. Despite the change in British policy towards trade union organisation, letters in the earlier folders demonstrate the restrictions on movement between countries that could be imposed by colonial governments. There is much on the Caribbean Labour Congress, and the impact of the split of the WFTU on labour allegiances in the Caribbean region. The folder for 1960-61 contains several documents of importance for the debate over Federation in the West Indies.

It could be argued that this collection presents again a 'top-down' view of labour organisation in the Caribbean; that Hart, and the other individuals whose voices can be heard in the collection, represent only the leaders of labour and politics. However, the papers are important evidence of the range of ideological difference, and its effects, both within the Jamaican labour movement, and between the British colonies and former British colonies in this region. The Hart papers demonstrate the strength and influence of the trade union movement during this period, but also show that the story is not one of mutual agreement between all parties involved.

C L R James papers - ICS 40

The early career of C L R James demonstrates the ways in which ideas circulated to and within the Caribbean. James left Trinidad in 1932, having worked as a teacher and journalist, and travelled to England at the invitation of the cricketer Leavie Constantine. In England, James became a member

of the Trotskyist movement, and joined the Independent Labour Party. In 1938, he moved to the US, spending the next fifteen years writing and lecturing, mainly on the pan-Africanist movement. James was expelled from the US in 1953, because of his political views, and moved back to Britain. In 1958, he returned to Trinidad to edit the People's National Party newspaper, at the request of Eric Williams. Over the next five years, James was active in politics across the West Indies, and, as secretary of the West Indies Federal Labour Party, campaigned in favour of the Federation.

The papers held by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies mainly relate to this latter period, and were donated by C L R James to the Institute in 1966. They are arranged in 11 series, the first relating to James' activities across the West Indies. The next five series contain material collected by James on political parties and trade unions in Barbados, British Guiana, Grenada, Jamaica and Trinidad. The remaining series in the collection relate to West Indies organisations in Britain, and then collections of personal letters, lectures, publications, and some of James' writings and notes on other interests.

The file on Trinidad contains more than seventy entries. These include materials from the People's National Movement, the West Indian Independence Party, Trinidad, and Sugar Workers' organisations. There is a large amount of material relating to the oil workers' strike in June-August 1960, including copies of the strike newsletter produced during the dispute.

The James papers are well-used in the Institute, and researchers often pay attention to the files on federation. The correspondence between James and political leaders in this region is often candid. This is particularly the case in the letters between James and Norman Manley, in which Manley confides his views on the political situation in Jamaica and on political leaders elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Commonwealth Trade Union Council (CTUC) records

The last group of records that I want to talk about are a recent donation to the Institute, and so have not yet been fully sorted and listed. The records cover a later period to those described above, as the CTUC was active between 1980 and the end of 2004. The organisation was based at

Congress house in London, and had regional offices where it was carrying out project activities. Its main funders were Canadian, Australian, and UK associations of unions. However, there was participation in the CTUC from Caribbean trade union leaders, and the CTUC ran projects in the Caribbean, with an officer based at Barbados, for most of its existence.

The CTUC's main activities were in organising and funding training and awareness programmes, although it did also take a role in lobbying Commonwealth and government bodies in support of trade union rights. The records deposited at the Institute are from the London office, and include: correspondence with labour organisations and funding bodies; reports of projects and training events; and publicity materials. The CTUC was not a large organisation, and the records often show the restrictions on resources, and the difficulties in communicating over long distances. Records relating to the Caribbean projects demonstrate the logistical problems of co-ordinating work across a very large region, and with groups that had differing ambitions, expectations and levels of experience.

In preparation for this paper, I have looked at the correspondence between the CTUC and labour organisations across the Caribbean. These have included the smaller states, as well as the larger. Indeed, it may be that the smaller organisations were the ones that were most interested in collaboration with the CTUC. A letter from the Dominica Trade Union, referring to an earlier CTUC project, expresses frustration that the union was often overlooked in CCL initiatives.

The records are useful in their description of government-union relations across the region. This can be found in reports prepared for the CTUC, letters written to the director, and in press clippings and other information that was considered useful and added to a country's or organisation's file. For example, there is a file for the St Vincent National Workers' Movement, which contains a page from a CCL publication (dated 1981 by hand) which describes the formation of a popular organisation, headed by unions, to defeat two bills introduced by the Prime Minister. One of these, the "Essential Services Amendment Bill", was seen as a reaction by the government to a campaign successfully waged on behalf of workers in the Water Works Department. In reporting the success of the campaign against the government bills, the publication notes that a, *'Dominica-type situation has fortunately thus been avoided'* ([CCL?], [nd, 1981?]).

At a similar time, the St Kitts and Nevis Trades and Labour Union reported on the hostility of the government there to the union. A short report, forwarded to the CTUC by the union, notes that the government is also one of the main employers in the state. Tactics attributed to the government include: directing employers not to recognise the union; setting up alternative unions; and dismissing Trades and Labour Union members from their jobs. The report notes that the ICFTU had called on the government to end this action. The file does not hold very much in correspondence for the next 15-20 years, and the silence is significant. A US Department of Labor report on the country, quoted by Robert Alexander, describes the devastating effect of government policies on the union, and the relative inaction of the union (which was affiliated to the opposition Labour Party) during the period (Alexander, 2004, pg 137). The Labour Party was successful in the 1995 elections, and an undated letter in the CTUC file, probably from around 2000, reports on a visit to St Kitts Nevis, and describes government relations with unions as '*reasonably good*'.

The information for Guyana gives a detailed report by an observer to the union situation there in early 2000. There had been reports about divisions nationally amongst unions, and the exploitation of this by the PPP government to weaken the overall strength of the unions. The CTUC file contains the findings of the report, alongside a news clipping from the *Guyana Chronicle*, relating to the visit, titled '*Mashing sensitive corns*'.

As well as commenting on government relations, the records also show the interest that the unions took in wider social and political concerns. A number of union groups, such as the Grenada TUC and the Montserrat Allied Workers' Union, requested support in setting up libraries and resource centres. A letter from the Montserrat Allied Workers Union, in 1985, describes the number of activities that the union supported. These included a school, credit union, plays and music competitions. A review of the Dominica Waterfront and Allied Workers Union, at the end of 1996, concluded that members expected the union to be a catalyst for change, and that its role should be wider than reacting to employers and negotiating on salary. In 1998, the Grenada Technical and Allied Workers Union, in collaboration with the Grenada TUC, was seeking funding for a rural workers' programme. The programme would address problems of impoverishment and the shrinkage of the agricultural sector, in particular looking at the conditions of women working on farms.

This description of CTUC records is a first impression, and a more-detailed analysis will have to wait until the records have been more-properly sorted. For example, the Caribbean Projects files could be expected to provide details on union activities, as well as planned projects and aspirations. The initial investigation suggests that they will be an important source of information on the trade union movement at the end of the twentieth century, across the whole of the former British-administered Caribbean region. It is possible that they will, in particular, be a useful source for the study of smaller states.

Conclusions

Librarians at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies have attempted to collect materials that represent alternate views and experiences of people and organisations other than those related to the imperial or national administrations (although these are also collected). The materials held, and discussed here, have been filtered by the various processes by which they have become available to the Institute in London. Larger organisations, and those with offices or links in London, are better-represented. The collections also show evidence of conscious decisions about what types of materials should be collected. Discussing the Political Archives, Danny Millum wrote, *'the very decision to begin collecting political materials assumes the value of this type of material produced by these kinds of organisation'* (Millum, 2005). The private papers collected are more likely to represent those who had been leading the labour movements, or who had extensive contacts with the leaders.

However, this presentation has also argued that the records held at the Institute can be used to develop an understanding of organised labour that is informed by more than national or imperial accounts. The Moyne Commission papers include contemporary concerns from a range of people, including labour leaders, women's groups, and individuals. The Political Archives provide evidence of contemporary events and opinions from groups other than governments or organisations based outside the Caribbean. As with the CTUC archives, they also provide a source for study of smaller states and local organisations. Similarly, the private papers of Richard Hart and C L R James show a diversity of opinion on priorities and policies for the region.

Searching the archives

The discussion of the Political Archives mentioned the cataloguing project and the ways in which those materials may now be searched. For the other archive collections, the University of London Research Library Services, of which the Institute Library is a part, is developing an online archives catalogue. This will allow researchers to search across the archive collections held at a level of detail not previously available. Of the collections described, the C L R James Papers, and the records of the Moyne Commission, have already been added. This database can be seen at <http://archives.ulrsls.lon.ac.uk>. The presentation of the database will be complete during 2007. However, further cataloguing work will continue to be required, and the Library is looking for sources of funding to support this work.

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