

NJAC Viewpoint

Pettiness belittles Butler's struggle

As far as the National Joint Action Committee is concerned, June 19, 1937, represents one of the most important days in the evolution of our nation. June 19, 1937, is in fact a sacred day in the annals of our nation's history. Many people made tremendous sacrifices, even the ultimate in terms of the loss of lives in the interest of the advancement of the workers and citizens of our beloved nation.

It is indeed therefore, a sad day when, in reference to the sixty ninth (69th) anniversary of the annual celebration of Labour Day, June 19th 1937, officially recognised as the birth date of the Trade Union movement in Trinidad and Tobago, a reporter from one of the print media could state: *"Yesterday's Labour Day celebrations at Fyzabad centred around revelry, with only a small number of people displaying the true spirit of the occasion."*

It was most ironic, that this was witnessed by Roger Toussaint, the New York based labour leader, president of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, who recently made headlines around the world, when he orchestrated a strike protesting workers' issues, that halted New York's City subways and buses last December 2005. Toussaint was invited by FITUN (the Federation of Independent Trade Unions) to deliver the feature address at their Labour Day observances at Fyzabad and experiencing the revelry and the bitter division within the Trade Union Movement, chose to speak on the need for unity among the trade union movement here in Trinidad and Tobago.

The movement should have felt embarrassed that this man, who had been jailed for leading a workers struggle in New York and who was its guest, instead of being able to speak of unity and achievement in the trade union movement, focused on the disunity and bitterness, as a result of what he had experienced. He called on the trade union movement to unite stating that *"If this movement does not unite and go back to the traditional labour movement practices, the country would be robbed of what it truly deserves"*. He made the observation that Trinidad and Tobago was experiencing a defining moment in terms of what was going to happen in the next twenty five years, given the tremendous amount of oil and gas the country was producing. These are views which NJAC shares and has held for many years.

What was instructive was that a call had previously been made by union leadership not to have revelry in the celebrations. Instead, the nation was confronted with the controversy in Fyzabad on June 19th about whether there should be a carnival, a jouvert, a queen show or a parade of masqueraders, rather than a united demonstration of the workers and citizens reaffirming their undying commitment to the continuing struggle to ensure that the people of Trinidad and Tobago enjoy the wealth of our blessed nation. This was because revelry has been the traditional manner of Labour Day observances. In fact, at one time in the past, flyers and ads for Labour Day observances had at the bottom: *"bar, buffet and ices"*. This is what the workers had become accustomed to and had internalised, so the call was to no avail.

The rallying cry for Labour Day should have echoed the demands of those courageous warriors of the 1930s who stood up in the interest of justice and

righteousness. In the words of the late great Tubal Uriah Buzz Butler, speaking after his release from prison in 1937:

“ If you don't realise the real issue, go back to that memorable day, the day of the June 19 rebellion, when those fascist imperialist employers, the oppressors of the masses, were on the run before the onslaught of the combined forces of labour, demanding social equality and justice.”

Instead of the workers of our nation assembling in Fyzabad as a demonstration of their power as a united, organised and mobilised movement, determined to defend the rights and privileges of the citizenry, instead of this gallant demonstration, the nation had to endure the unfortunate display of disunity, amongst essentially the masses of the disenfranchised workers and their representatives, on the streets of Fyzabad and at time of an advancing globalisation.

Until the entire leadership of the trade union movement recognises the absolute necessity to place the national interest above and beyond that of all other interests, until such time, the hopes and aspirations of the workers of our nation will continue to perish. As Tubal Uriah Buzz Butler noted, it is based on the combined forces of labour that the forward march of the people of our nation will be guaranteed.

NJAC remains resolute in our position that June 19th cannot and must not be transformed into a Fyzabad Borough Day Celebration. The struggles, sacrifices and achievements of Butler and the Butlerites of the 1920s, 30s and 40s must not be wasted on the altar of pettiness and divisiveness. Carnival and revelry have their place in the social and cultural calendar of our nation. It has no place in the annual observance of Labour Day, June 19. The national interest of Trinidad and Tobago must once more assume its rightful place and significance in determining the future of our nation.

Our failure to address these fundamental weaknesses, will simply render our people ready and willing pawns to be used and manipulated in the international arena of power and authority.