

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

TIME: 4:15 p.m.

DATE: December 4, 1961

PLACE: The White House

SUBJECT: Labor Situation in British Guiana

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Wendell Bobb - General Secretary of the British Guiana Mine Workers Union
Mr. Don Clouse - United Steel Workers of America
Mr. Arthur Schlesinger - Special Assistant to the President
Mr. Rockwood H. Foster - Acting Officer in Charge, West Indies Affairs

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Mr. Schlesinger opened the conversation by asking Mr. Bobb if he would discuss the labor situation in British Guiana.

Mr. Bobb said that the Jagan Government was actively pushing to enter the labor field and, if possible, capture political support from the trades union. Both Canadian and American bauxite companies in British Guiana were being urged to employ a greater number of workers of Indian extraction. He commented that in the past only Africans had been willing to undertake mining because of the bad conditions. Over the past few years the bauxite companies have improved conditions substantially and this form of employment had begun to attract Indian workers.

Mr. Bobb observed that the leadership of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was in difficulties since it had supported the United Front (UF) and its leader Peter D'Aguiar during the recent election campaign. The majority of workers, however, being of African extraction had been supporters of the People's National Congress (PNC) and its leader Forbes Burnham.

In discussing the Man Power Citizens Association (MPCA) Mr. Bobb observed that its leader Mr. Ishmael was in serious trouble. He was trying to hold down the position of General Secretary of this sugar union as well as his regular job as principal in a high school. Jagan and the People's Progressive Party

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Party (PPP) were opposed to Ishmael and trying to steal MPCA members over to the PPP sponsored Sugar Workers Union (SWU). The membership of the MPCA was highly critical of Ishmael since they charged him with ignoring their problems. Mr. Bobb observed that the responsibilities at the high school made it very difficult for Ishmael to be away for very long.

Mr. Ruppert Tello, the former General Secretary of the Trade Union Council, is now in Barbados. Mr. Bobb understood that he is now working for Peter D'Aguiar's brewery there. He did not expect that Tello would become influential in the Barbados labor union since Mr. Frank Walcott, the most influential labor leader on the Island, was opposed to him.

Mr. Bobb believed that Janet Jagan was working with Senator Ashton Chase in a drive to capture British Guiana's unions for the PPP. He felt, however, that this would be very difficult to accomplish in view of the heavy African membership of many organizations. He felt that in due course Mrs. Jagan and Senator Chase would set up a separate labor organization which would be affiliated with the World Federation of Trades Union (WFTU).

Mr. Schlesinger mentioned that we had received a rumor about the impending separation of Janet Jagan and her husband. He inquired as to the political effect which the break up of their marriage might have in British Guiana. Mr. Bobb remarked that these rumors had been circulating for some time and his initial reaction was that it would have little if any effect. Later during the discussion Mr. Bobb was told that Miles Fitzpatrick had taken a boat to England recently. Mr. Bobb reacted sharply to this [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] He reverted to this subject several times during the rest of the conversation giving the impression that the departure of Janet Jagan would hamper substantially the PPP's effort to penetrate British Guiana's trade union movement.

Mr. Schlesinger asked Mr. Bobb for his opinion of Forbes Burnham. He mentioned that several English sources had expressed some concern about Burnham's reliability and financial honesty. Mr. Bobb replied by explaining carefully that there was no alternative to Mr. Burnham and that he was a supporter of the PNC. He said he was not aware of any financial irregularities in which Burnham had been implicated.

Mr. Schlesinger described briefly to Mr. Bobb the problems facing US policy in the extending of aid to British Guiana. He pointed out that if the US should extend assistance, it would to some degree help Dr. Jagan politically. On the other hand, if the US should deny any assistance to British Guiana, it would mean that the legitimate needs of the people would not be met and those who are fighting for freedom would not receive help. Mr. Bobb expressed his opinion that on balance the US should extend aid to British Guiana but make every effort to prevent Dr. Jagan and the PPP from getting all the credit.

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Mr. Bobb said he wished to ask several questions and began with a request for our assessment of Dr. Jagan's economic views. In the absence of Mr. Schlesinger who was called to another meeting, Mr. Foster expressed the personal opinion that Dr. Jagan's economic views seemed old fashioned and behind the times for a young political leader of an emerging nation. The world's knowledge of economics and the problems of economic development had advanced substantially in the last few decades and Dr. Jagan's economic philosophy seemed to reflect left-wing thought current in the early 1930's. Mr. Foster then informed Mr. Bobb of the contents of the press release issued with Dr. Jagan's approval at the end of his recent visit and pointed out that the US had promised to help bring the most modern economic experience to bear on British Guiana's economic problems.

Mr. Bobb asked if Jagan had mentioned at all to us his need for arms and ammunition. Mr. Bobb said that the PPP had organized a volunteer group of some two hundred men which could, if necessary, "supplement" the police. He also said that Dr. Jagan was trying to step up recruitment of Indians in the police force which was now largely composed of African patrolmen. Mr. Foster said that he did not believe that this subject was raised during Dr. Jagan's visit to Washington. He doubted very much whether Dr. Jagan would have thought the time appropriate to mention it to the United States.

Finally, Mr. Bobb indicated his desire to establish a central library and branch facilities for trade union people throughout British Guiana. He hoped to stock this library with books, pamphlets, and exhibits. These would not only be on the subjects of labor interest, but he hoped also that suitable anti-Communist materials could be included. He mentioned in particular the USIS pamphlet "What Can A Man Believe?" and asked if similar excellent publications were available for distribution. Mr. Foster suggested that Mr. Bobb discuss his project in detail with the recently arrived Public Affairs Officer, Mr. Horan, at Georgetown. He felt sure that Mr. Horan would be very interested in this project and would be glad to cooperate as appropriate in obtaining suitable materials. Mr. Foster suggested also that Mr. Bobb should see what assistance his fraternal contacts in Canadian and US Trades Union could provide to the library, pointing out that USIS could supply only a limited selection of materials which were of specific trade union interest.

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