

Revisiting Caribbean Labour

Essays in Honour of O. Nigel Bolland

Edited by
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- in the Caribbean, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, January 2001).
50. Ibid.
 51. Joan French and Honor Ford-Smith, 'Women, Work and Organisation in Jamaica: 1900-1934', 49.
 52. *Jamaica Standard* (May 1938): 16.
 53. W. Arthur Lewis, *Labour in the West Indies*, 35.
 54. *Jamaica Standard* (May 18, 1938).
 55. Ibid. (May 20, 1938).
 56. W. Arthur Lewis, *Labour in the West Indies*, 35.
 57. *Jamaica Standard* (May 23, 1938).
 58. Ibid.
 59. Ibid.
 60. Ibid. (May 30, 1938): 1
 61. Ibid. (June 17, 21, 22, 1938).
 62. Ibid. (March 23, 1938).
 63. Ibid. (June 27, 1938).
 64. Joan French and Honor Ford-Smith, 'Women, Work and Organisation in Jamaica: 1900-1934', 276.
 65. This, interestingly, was reflected in changes in the compilation of labour statistics and definition of the labour force resulting in the exclusion of large numbers of women, see Rhoda Reddock, *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History* and Joan French, 'Colonial Policy Towards Women After the 1938 Uprising: The Case of Jamaica', *Caribbean Quarterly* 34, nos. 3&4 (1988): 38-61.
 66. The membership of housewives and domestics in the Oilfield Workers Trade Union continued through the formation of an auxiliary body – the All Trinidad Transport and General Workers Trade Union (ATTGWU). But the two unions continued to operate as one union. Daisy Crick a housewife, became president of the La Brea Branch of the ATTGWU in 1939 and in 1946, was reported as being President of the La Brea Branch of the OWTU (Rhoda Reddock, *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History*, 261).

Continuing the Fight for Economic Justice: The Barbados Sugar Workers' 1958 Wildcat Strike

Constance R. Sutton*

'It began like an instinct or gift – let we combine to one another', an agricultural labourer proclaimed to me in the spring of 1958 as some 19,000 workers, dispersed across Barbados's 260 sugar estates, stopped cutting cane. Resorting to an unauthorized work stoppage, sugar workers, roughly half of whom were women, engaged in an islandwide wildcat strike that shut down Barbados's sugar industry for a period of over five weeks. This unannounced collective action was unprecedented in scale and duration. It precipitated a national crisis on an island where a monocrop plantation economy had held sway for over 300 years, and where sugar represented 45 per cent of the island's gross domestic product and 95 per cent of its exports.

This essay describes the unfolding of this dramatic event, what it signified about the role of sugar workers in the labour politics of the time, and how the content of their race/class-based consciousness informed their actions. The sugar workers' 1958 wildcat strike is a protest action that remains to be commemorated in Barbados's history of past struggles for freedom, equality, and justice. It speaks to sugar workers' view of participatory democracy.

At the time the strike occurred I was living in Ellerton, St George, a village adjacent to the island's largest cluster of sugar estates. I was engaged in anthropological field research on villagers' responses to the introduction of trade unionism and mass politics during the 1945-55 decade.¹ These changes had followed the famous 1937 riots/rebellion that signaled the end of the political

dominance of Barbados's sugar plantocracy. The occurrence of this strike afforded me the opportunity to observe the unfolding dynamics of an important protest action in which sugar workers across the island acted en masse without visible leadership or overall coordination. Moreover, I was able to contextualize how this event was prompted by the specific beliefs workers held about their new 'coloured'² middle-class political and labour leaders, and about the white plantation owners and managers. These latter, along with town merchants, continued to control Barbados's economy, but after the first election based on universal adult suffrage, they were dislodged from political control. I recorded the various discourses of participants in this event, some of which revealed how past memories could inform their actions. This essay presents a rare account of a significant collective protest as seen from the perspective of the sugar workers who made it happen. Its meaning needs to be located within that crucial period from the 1930s through the 1950s when labour politics played a key role in reshaping Barbadian society, a period in the British Caribbean about which Bolland³ has written with penetrating clarity.

Unlike today, Barbados's sugar estate workers in the late 1950s still constituted the largest single category of concentrated labour (26 per cent of the total labour force) – and yet the trade union movement considered them the most difficult category to organize. One could argue that this was due to the presumptions trade union leaders held about agricultural labourers, and to how they approached this task. Too little was known by labour leaders and others about the bargaining strategies of agricultural workers.

It is striking that so little is recorded about how sugar workers succeeded in negotiating reforms and customary rights on the plantations both during and after slavery, though there is evidence that as far back as the eighteenth century enslaved people engaged in collective bargaining over their conditions of work and employed the weapon of collective withdrawal of labour in support of their efforts to extend their customary rights.⁴ To this slim record Beckles⁵ adds that in the post-emancipation period there is evidence of

instances where labourers struggled to attain social and material benefits that would allow them to create 'a life of their own'. We are left with unfortunate lacunae about how the specific politics of agricultural labourers contributed to the history of grassroots struggles for freedom, justice and equality through strategies that entailed direct democratic action.

With respect to a more recent period, Nigel Bolland⁶ provides us with a richly informed account of how the legacies of the past shaped racial consciousness and class formation in the British Caribbean. This informed the labour rebellions of the 1930s, and what followed afterwards as a new labour politics emerged. In addition, in the *rewriting* of Barbados's past, Hilary Beckles and others have foregrounded key incidents of collective protest, mainly riots/rebellions, thus highlighting a continuous resistance on the part of Barbados's agricultural sugar workers.⁷ However, in chronicling this lineage of resistance, the labour stoppages of sugar workers are omitted, leaving the occurrence of these events to be bracketed away as 'labour disturbances' in newspapers in union reports after the 1940s. This essay seeks to add to the history of grassroots protests a close examination of one such event – the sugar workers' 1958 wildcat strike. It is an event I personally witnessed. And, in contrast to top-down accounts, I present a bottom-up view of the unfolding of this event and what it implies about democratic action from below.

Situating the Strike in its Historical Context

The 1958 sugar workers strike happened 13 years after the Barbados Workers Union (BWU) secured the right to represent workers in collective bargaining, and seven years after the first election based on universal suffrage had occurred, producing black/brown political leaders whose election to parliament depended on support from the large black, non-elite population. Twenty-one years had passed since the 1937 deportation of Clement Payne provoked three days of riots/rebellion/revolution, which started in Bridgetown and spread to the countryside. Payne had been holding public meetings urging workers to organize and strike, as workers elsewhere in the British

Caribbean were doing, and to confront issues of racial and cultural oppression. The 1937 rebellion marked a turning point in Barbadian history. It became a proclamation for demanding social change. The white plantocracy's semi-feudal control over black labourers was challenged and the British launched a Colonial Development and Welfare Programme. A number of urgent relief schemes were instituted to head off further disturbances and public welfare programmes were established. 'Coloured' political leaders began to actively champion working-class causes, to appeal directly to the masses for political support, and to turn their rhetoric into direct assaults on the plantocracy. This led to increased political activism by workers and an increase in their demands for greater economic equity.

However, change after 1937 was slow and in February of 1939 there was widespread labour unrest, including numerous strikes for higher wages on sugar estates. These protests were accompanied by cane fires. Governor General Waddington attributed this to the presence of the West Indian Royal (Moyne) Commission which, he argued, led workers to expect benefits they thought the government was denying them. Grantley Adams, head of the Barbados Progressive League, held a large Bridgetown meeting to explain to workers how trade unions worked, to pay tribute to the government, and to appeal to workers for patience and good behaviour, telling them it was both stupid and criminal to strike when negotiations were the correct way to improve conditions.⁸ This became the main approach of the trade union: namely, to keep workers in check, teach them trade-union discipline, oppose direct action, and focus on having union representatives negotiate on their behalf in case of conflicts or grievances. It was a no-strike policy, as villagers told me in 1958. But in 1939, though strikers had displayed a new militancy, by March 1, cane cutters and dock workers were back at work and a committee was appointed by the government to review their wages.

In 1945 'unrest' again hit the sugar crop season, this time over the method of payment for cane cutting. Cane cutters worked

desultorily, quitting and starting again, depending on their relationship to a particular estate manager or owner and the concessions each was willing to make. These work stoppages spread to adjoining estates, but unlike the 1958 strike there was no massive or complete walkout. Political leaders intervened in support of the demands of the workers, but differed in whether they urged workers to return to work or to remain on strike.⁹ Some 3,000 acres of cane were burned, with owners accusing workers and workers accusing owners. A loss of 30,000 tons of output resulted, costing about two million dollars in national income. Pressed to intervene, the government brought in an outside expert to inquire into the causes of the labour unrest and recommend changes.¹⁰ The recommendations supported the sugar cane workers' demands and were accepted by the planters.¹¹ Both the BWU and the Congress Union, led by Wynter Crawford, jointly represented the workers at the meeting involving the settlement in November, 1945 with the recently formed Sugar Producers Federation (SPF).¹²

The 1945 sugar labourers' work stoppages marked a departure from the past and foreshadowed what took place in 1958. It was in fact recalled by all sides of the 1958 labour dispute.

*The Sugar Workers' 1958 Wildcat Strike*¹³

What was to become the most determined, widespread, and prolonged strike of agricultural labourers began quietly with no prior rumours or threats of a work stoppage. On April 8, the Tuesday morning following an Easter Bank Holiday, cane workers on two adjoining plantations in the southeast parishes, where the crop season ends earlier than elsewhere, reported to work but refused to cut cane unless the manager assured them a 15-cent per ton wage increase. Told that they were entitled to only a six-cent raise, the workers left. News of their action spread to nearby plantations where labourers followed suit, and by early afternoon rumours had reached the village in which I was living.¹⁴ I was with a cutting team on a nearby estate when the lorry driver returned from the sugar factory to pick up the cane and told the group that workers elsewhere had

quit. The three male cutters and three women loaders gathered around the lorry driver to consider the news. They called it a 'consultation'. Everyone ventured an opinion, expressed in the oblique idiom Bajans (colloquial term for Barbardians) use to sense sentiment, and then one person commented, 'well, it would look funny to go on when de others stopping'. Another chimed in that if they stopped, 'it mus be to get the raise-of-pay,' and I noted that this was the only reference made to a specific issue that might be at stake. Someone else said: 'well, my one can't reap this crop; if others lay off, then I got to too'. Then the first-row cutter announced, 'let we not play the fool but combine wi' the others!' At this point the team shouldered their cane bills and the entire group walked off the field.

I went with them down the road for a bit and as we passed other cutting teams, individuals called out to us, 'where you heading?' To which someone in the group would reply: 'we hear that people in Christ Church and St Philip (southeast island parishes) stop, so we too stop; we done cutting the white man's cane for the day'. Nothing more was said; nor was it suggested that others follow their example. A slow drift off the canefields soon became visible and an hour and a half later cutting at the nearby estates had ceased. Some of the labourers went home; others gathered at the village rum shops 'for a spree'. Having taken things into their own hands, they waited to see what the response would be.

The next day the *Advocate*, the only daily newspaper, published a small article stating that there were unconfirmed rumours of walkouts on a few plantations but that Frank Walcott, executive secretary of the BWU,¹⁵ said he knew nothing about them, and that Mandeville, head of the SPF, had no comment. A day later the existence of the strike was acknowledged. The lead article in the *Advocate* said that the union was concerned about stoppages in the sugar industry and was taking steps to bring about a resumption of work in the areas affected since these stoppages were unauthorized. The article also said that the unofficial strike, which began Tuesday, had spread to more than 23 plantations and could cripple the sugar industry since threats of walkouts were reported from other areas and some factories

had already been brought to a standstill with canes piled up at the mill door. The following day the labour commissioner stated that while everyone was now aware that stoppages had occurred on Tuesday and Wednesday, what labourers did not realize was that these stoppages were entirely unofficial and without union support. Discussions between the BWU and the SPF about wage increases were in progress. He urged labourers to resume work so that these discussions might continue because of the importance of the sugar industry to the island's economy. The minister of trade, industry, and labour, speaking over the rediffusion (wired radio), asked labourers to use their good judgment and resume reaping the crop for reasons similar to those already given. Finally, an appeal was made to their 'common sense', a national trait for which Bajans take pride. This should cause the labourers to see the danger and foolishness of their action.

Although union leaders officially dissociated themselves from the strike, they could not ignore it. Given the politics of the time, they suspected that the strike had been provoked by a rival political group in order to test and undermine Frank Walcott's position. They also feared that politicians would try to 'cash in' on the discontent by organizing the many sugar workers who were not dues-paying members of the union, though represented by the BWU in bargaining. Walcott initially felt it necessary to demonstrate to the sugar producers and political competitors alike that the union was in control of the situation and could get the people back to work. Over the weekend he held many public meetings in the countryside that were attended by large crowds of workers. I accompanied some of the estate and factory workers in Ellerton to a big meeting held where the first walkout began. Walcott spoke for two and a half hours while a crowd of over 300 people stood quietly and listened. His dilemma, of convincing workers that the union was vigorously championing their cause while demonstrating to the sugar owners and others that he could control the workers he represented, is reflected in his speech. What follows is a sample of Walcott's main statements:

The sugar industry earns \$30 million a year and everybody on this island depends on it. You put the union in an embarrassing position if you continue to strike. You have to go about things in a normal, civilized way. The same holds true for negotiations concerning money.

I pleased with your unity, but your attitude shows up that you not fully aware of what is taking place in the sugar industry. Big talk is all right when they got money in their pocket. I not afraid to call and lead a strike if employers won't do what workers say. None of Walcott's yams or slips or potatoes come from managers – and I know the managers out there listening. I can meet the manager with a stick, I am no coward. When managers want to wry up, I'll meet them straight...I can talk to Chandler, Pile (two prominent, long-time plantation owners), and the others. I don't owe these employers anything. This other is regular cheap Bajan talk.

I know these canes don't burn down by accident. But canes being burnt don't put shoes on this little fellow here. Every cane fire is a loss to workers. *Sugar is our life-blood* and I won't be associated with any method that reduces earning capacity of workers. If stopping will bring increase, I'd be 100 percent with it. But I know it don't.

People are treating me bad by not supporting me ... I'm speaking to your common sense not your emotion and I'm speaking in your interest because and your and my interest is the same. I have some knowledge of the trade union movement that you should respect. In England they give notice when they call a strike. Union cannot support this strike because they have to know something about it before.

It is necessary that you support us up to the hilt ... and place confidence in us. We doin' everything possible to get this piece of change for you.

Walcott's 'speechifying' typified the style in which owners and leaders spoke to agricultural workers. He oscillated between scolding labourers for not behaving as 'civilized' union members, and vehement assertions of how he was not indebted to the powerful white elite owners of sugar estates, and how tough he could be in 'facing off' to their representative, Mandeville, when bargaining on behalf of the workers. But gaining workers' trust was not an easy matter, as I noted when the day following his speech, villagers discussed it thoroughly. Many said they were not convinced by Walcott, either because he couldn't (was not able to) openly flout the planters, or because he had to carry out government orders. This

was in keeping with earlier village talk, the many anecdotes told which underscored the belief that the white elite were still too powerful for the new political leaders to confront directly. Others wavered over Walcott's call to return to work. But on Monday, the beginning of the second week of the strike, it was clear that neither the union nor government officials had succeeded in halting the spread of work stoppages. The villagers in the Ellerton district stayed away from the fields.

Each morning small groups gathered on the roadside corners to assess their situation. The positions taken by union officials, political leaders, and the daily newspaper were discussed and evaluated, and evening news on rediffusion was attentively listened to for incidental information on how widespread the strike was. While in the absence of any formal leadership, there was uncertainty about what to do, the predominant sentiment expressed was that since they had taken a stand, they should see how long they could hold out. It appeared to me that the sheer defiance of their action was what was in part sustaining it.

It was alleged that the estate 'drivers' (foremen) tried to persuade labourers to return to work, but were told 'we not movin' till we ready'. Several people recounted, with great pleasure, how the manager of the adjacent Bulkeley Estates had driven about the village 'beggin' people to return to work, only to be told he had better stay away or they would have to insult him. With a touch of bravado they stated: 'We cursed him bad you know; he gone after that! He can only drive about *non-stop* now'. The statement indicated that they had temporarily redrawn the permeable boundary between village and estate, thereby challenging the traditional right of estate personnel to enter their terrain, which was in part tenancies owned by the estate. An undercurrent of defiance was also present in the conversations I had with my neighbours. Asking how they would make out if the strike continued, they responded saying: 'As long as we holding one another's mind, let the shoe pinch the foot!'. With pride they told me how hardship had taught them how to tighten their belts and bear trouble. Or as one person ironically proclaimed,

'the Lord will provide; He bring we a little mustard green or maybe a little rice and saltfish', at which point everyone broke into laughter.

A striking feature of this collective action was how it was initially achieved. It was only through the informal sanctions and mutual understandings of individual cutting teams that each team, though affected by the actions of others, made its own decision as to whether or not they would stop working. There was no way for strikers to compel others to act with them in concert. Whether or not others would 'swim with the tide' was a matter over which striking cane workers had no control, though there was little doubt that all agricultural labourers shared the same grievances. Nor were any formal representations made to management, the union, or government officials. Picketing was illegal, the strike was illegal, and in the absence of visible leadership and coordination, there were no mechanisms for striking workers to show their massed strength in demonstrations. Apart from the refusal to work, there was only one other signal of protest – the equally anonymous burning of canefields that had occurred since the beginning of slavery. And, during the course of the 1958 strike an estimated 4,000 acres of cane were burned. It became clear that workers rejected the 'civilized'/English concept of representative democracy as the proper relationship between union leadership and members. Believing that only the direct action of workers could challenge elite power, they took the lead in the struggle.

Other Barbadians expressed surprise and puzzlement over the spreading strike. The earnings of cane workers had steadily improved over the past 10 years and they had made good money the previous year because of a record ('windfall') crop of over 200,000 tons which brought a hefty wage increase. The *Advocate* editorialized that it was baffled over the reasons for the strike, and Walcott, the union leader, told me privately that he thought: 'they suffering more from irritation than any genuine grievances; this strike is not symptomatic of their aspirations'. But Walcott was wrong. He had not taken in their new 'aspirations', or their willingness to continue the fight for greater economic justice.

There were a number of immediate causes for the stoppages. Cane workers were disappointed over their 1958 weekly earnings which did not approach their 1957 earnings, due to the light weights of the canes caused by a severe drought. They felt a setback in the 'rising expectations' produced by the previous year, and they were simultaneously faced with a recent cost-of-living increase. Also, Easter had just passed, half the crop had been reaped, but they had not yet received their annual increase for 1958 because 'the price had not yet been fixed.' It was customary to begin the cutting season at the same wage rate as the previous year and to receive one's annual increase (retroactive to January 1) before Easter. Negotiations over the amount of increase were still in progress, and rumors circulated that the delay was due to a conflict between the union and the sugar owners. The union was asking for a 15 cent per ton increase while the sugar producers would grant only a six cent per ton increase, an offer they claimed that was based on a wage formula contained in a three-year agreement signed the previous year. The controversy centred on interpreting the terms of the previous agreement and whether the union's demands violated these terms.

Cane workers, however, knew little and cared even less about the intricacies of agreements or of collective bargaining. In fact, they were suspicious of both. What they did know is that due to the 'windfall' crop of the prior year, planters made a lot of extra money. Some even knew that the negotiated price of sugar, set by the Commonwealth Sugar Agreements, had just been increased by eight dollars per ton. It was this new evidence that planters 'can afford to pay we more money' that counted.

What had changed over the past decade was their feeling that they had a right to demand a greater share of the profits of the sugar industry. What also changed was their willingness to use their own bargaining power – refusing to reap the crop – to force a recognition of this right, on the part of the BWU as well as the SPF. The strike was indeed symptomatic of their aspirations which encompassed their new sense of entitlement. Sugar workers, like their trade union and political leaders, did not demand that sugar estates be

expropriated or the sugar industry be nationalized. The prevailing ideology of economic justice in Barbados did not encompass this socialist concept. As Beckles¹⁶ points out, Barbadian political leaders sought only to reform not transform the socioeconomic structure of the society.

In this context another precipitating factor came to the fore, one reflecting sugar workers' views about the union and their new politicians. While mindful of the gains received from trade union negotiations and new legislation, they nonetheless did not trust their new leaders to be able or willing to stand up to the power still wielded by white managers, planters, merchants, or officials of the SPF. Villagers regaled me with stories about how when a union representative called upon the estate manager to investigate a complaint lodged by a labourer, he would 'breeze past' the labourer, leaving him to stand by himself hat-in-hand in the plantation yard. When the union representative re-emerged, he would pat the labourer on the head, telling him 'Why don't you learn to behave yourself? Can't you see that Mr T. is a nice white man? Now, you go back to work or you'll cause the union lots of trouble.' Labourers resented the union's concept of 'proper behavior'. Its advice to 'continue working; you'll be paid later' was greeted with cynicism. Moreover, they were skeptical of the union's unofficial no-strike policy. 'Union leaders can't bear strikes; they 'fraid of management,' I was told. Because sugar workers did not have confidence that Walcott, head of the BWU, would be able to stand up to Mandeville, representation of the SPF, they decided to take things into their own hands. Resorting to their traditional bargaining strategy of spontaneous work stoppages, they staged their first islandwide wildcat strike which shut down the whole industry. The stoppage signified what sugar workers thought was the effective way to make their voice heard. It was an example of direct action democracy. It gave workers a 'voice' in what was happening and was experienced as empowering.

A week after the unauthorized walkouts began, the conflict moved into a second phase. When the strike continued to spread to new areas at the beginning of the second week, and it became apparent

that the union was unable to exercise control over the workers, the SPF broke off negotiations with the BWU. The SPF claimed it could not continue discussions under the abnormal conditions created by the wildcat strike. They argued that, unwilling to honour its collective agreements with the Federation, the strike was incited by the BWU because it had let it be known that the union was asking for a 15 cent increase. A signed statement of the three-year agreement was printed in the *Advocate* and the SPF requested that the issue be taken to arbitration. SPF's refusal to continue negotiations was interpreted by sugar workers and the BWU as a vindictive act aimed at testing the strength of the union. The union, in response, refused to take the issue to arbitration because a decision would be legally binding and they were pressing the SPF to state what their profits actually were. Thus, the issue of a raise in wages was deadlocked.

At this point the conflict became polarized, with each side mobilizing its political resources for a showdown – the sugar producers by retreating from the public scene and preparing to fight the issue solely on legal grounds, the union by reversing its tactics and attempting to capitalize on the demonstrated discontent of workers. The SPF could not appeal to the public for support. It sought instead to show that the owners could not be intimidated by 'lawless behaviour' or even by a threat to their profits. The union acted to reaffirm its position as rightful representative of the agricultural labour force, using the wildcat strike to strengthen its bargaining position, which legally was weaker than that of the sugar owners.

The day after the deadlock, the BWU held a rally in Bridgetown. It was attended by leaders of the Democratic Labour Party (DLP), the break-away party from the then governing Barbados Labour Party (BLP), and roughly 9,000 cane cutters and loaders who came from all parts of the island. During the course of a three-hour speech, Walcott formulated, for the first time in public, the union's stand and the issues at stake in the dispute with the sugar industry. The tone of his speech was now militant. Sugar owners were charged with being unwilling to meet the union on any ground for a reconciliation of

their differences and, more important, of being unwilling to produce figures to prove their inability to pay the increase requested. They were accused of resisting attempts to give workers higher wages because it might threaten their own high standards of living; and of treating sugar workers as 'the Cinderellas of an industry that was the backbone and lifeline of the island'. The owners wanted to ignore the fact that last year's crop was the highest in the history of the island, that sugar had been purchased at prices above those in previous years, and that sugar owners had been granted an additional \$8.00 dollar increase per ton. Hence the union's claim for a wage increase in excess of the 6 cent per ton stipulated by the agreement was only reasonable and just.

During his speech, Walcott urged workers 'to exercise tolerance, restraint, and forbearance in this national crisis', but he no longer asked them to resume working. Careful to avoid condoning the strike action, he suggested that workers do what they wanted, but whatever they did the union would not abdicate its duties to the workers. 'Unless the Sugar Producers' Federation is prepared to "up" their offer and discuss factors other than the agreement drawn up on the basis of the Commonwealth Wage Index', Walcott declared 'I will not talk with them'. He then asked the assembled mass of workers what they intended to do if the federation did not accept the union terms. He was answered with a thundering 'not work'.

Although Walcott stated he was not calling a strike, to sugar workers the rally made the strike official and by the next day the canefields were totally empty. The rally had consolidated the strike, established the right of union leaders to represent labourers and to articulate their grievances. It underlined support for the demand of a 15 cent increase per ton. At stake now was the question of a balance of power related to rights and privileges – between the planter class on one side and the union and workers on the other. But while the union and workers were now strongly allied, their views of the issues were not identical. A key goal of union leaders was to compel planters to relinquish some of their traditional privileges: in this case their refusal to disclose information concerning profits. For sugar workers

the issue was simpler. Convinced that they were always 'robbed and held down by white folks', they wanted to demonstrate their ability to hold out against the sugar owners 'till we git satisfaction'. It had become a demonstration of their strength against the power of sugar owners.

Without a single cane worker in the fields early in the second week, sugar factories had to shut down and the sugar industry was literally forced to grind to a halt. This added another 2,600 idle workers to the 19,000 striking sugar workers, bringing the total up to a third of the island's labour force. In this second phase of the strike, sugar workers were impressed with the scale of their success; their initial doubts were quelled and their daily uncertainty had vanished. The strike continued for another three-plus weeks. During this period workers went about tending to their own affairs and visiting friends and kin. The daily rhythm of village life was not visibly disturbed. The strikers, both women and men, were playing it cool and were it not for the newspaper headlines, radio speeches, and rallies to discuss the strike, an outside observer would have had little inkling that anything was amiss, or that 'disaster had struck the island' as newspaper headlines proclaimed. The minister of labour warned that 'the entire population was standing at the edge of a pit, at the bottom of which lay poverty and hardship for many, and loss of some kind for all'. While middle and upper class individuals spoke of facing a first-order crisis, villagers remained unperturbed.

By the third week the government, feeling pressed to resolve the crisis, announced it would appoint a board of inquiry composed of outside prestigious persons to inquire into the conflict and recommend ways to settle it. The government faced the problem of trying to bring the strike to an end before the board of inquiry met. Union leaders refused to urge workers to return to work, planters were in no position to make direct appeals to their workers, and the government party could not resort to measures that would lose the allegiance of sugar workers who formed the bulk of their voting support. So they continued pleading with workers to return to work, assuring them that the board of inquiry would hear their grievances.

This, however, was to no avail. By the fourth week the government's political problem was further exacerbated as the opposing DLP came out in open support of the strike. The DLP pledged to see that workers' demands were met, and the head of the party, Errol Barrow, threatened to go on a hunger strike to make good on this pledge, a threat which was greeted with amusement since he was a heavy-set man. The success of the DLP in the by-elections that took place in two parishes during the strike was generally attributed to the party's open support of the strike.

The strike lasted for over five weeks. The ability of sugar workers to sustain their action for this length of time without financial assistance from the union relates to specific social and cultural features of Barbadian rural communities. Sugar workers formed a substantial portion of all rural settlements. They were neither a geographically or socially isolated group but an integral part of village life, united with other villagers by special ties of shared history, kinship, friendship, and a belief in showing village solidarity when faced with outside threats. Thus, it was not possible to mobilize strikebreakers. Moreover, most sugar workers lived in households with family members who worked outside the sugar industry. Hence they were able to fall back on support from family and friends in the village, including the extension of credit from local shopkeepers. The village ideology of 'dwelling in unity' despite internal differences implied identifying with the causes of fellow villagers. Thus village unity morphed into islandwide class solidarity.

The strike was also sustained by the meanings workers brought to it. Antagonistic attitudes toward the white plantation managers helped fuel the strike, and frequently enunciated statements during the strike like: 'black folks never get a fair deal', 'white folks spiteful; they rob and cheat we', expressed their race/class consciousness. Nonetheless, a somewhat euphoric atmosphere permeated the village, and what appeared to be the single most important sentiment was a sense of pride. Sugar workers saw their strike action as exemplifying what union leaders and politicians had been preaching over the past several years – to act as a unified group and to fight for

a larger share of the wealth of the country. They had put this ideology of unity into practice – and on a scale that transcended all previous such actions. These sentiments were jointly held by both the women and men.

Others cast their interpretations of the strike in more spiritual terms. I was told the strike was a 'gift', a sign of the rising of the poor against the rich'. I also heard talk of Armageddon, of the island burning down and disaster falling upon all who had held down 'we poor black people'. One man told me he had dreamt about the strike a year ago and had been on the 'lookout for it ever since'. His dream had told him that agricultural workers 'would rise up like an army and bring destruction to this island'. But while the subjective meanings of the strike might often be cast in the strong language of the Old Testament, the action itself was confined to a quiet but determined refusal to work.

Another sustaining factor was the very publicity the strike received. It put agricultural workers in the spotlight, creating a temporary role reversal which they thoroughly enjoyed. Workers in Ellerton would joke about how people with power were 'begging we' to save the island from disaster. Parodying official statements, they would say: 'Hey man, you hear how everybody on this island depend on we? That you and me are *backbones* of this whole thing. You don' realize you powerful, man?' With their strategic value being daily impressed upon the rest of the society, workers experienced a feeling of importance they were normally denied.

What struck me most about the villagers' discourses were the references to a past legacy of protest, citing the recent work stoppages of 1945 mentioned earlier, the Confederation riots of 1876, and the 1937 riots. They drew on memories of these events to discuss how each compared with their current action – how it was different or similar. Invoking these memories and linking their action to historical events added meaning and historical legitimacy to their current action. I was surprised to find this kind of historical consciousness among the agricultural labourers when it was largely absent from available histories of the island. At the time, I knew little about the

Confederation Riots, which occurred before any of the workers were living, and the 1937 Riots, which were still fresh in their memories. I asked villagers to describe these earlier protests. They explained that each involved mass action on the part of agricultural labourers, attempting to take over plantation houses and sugar estates or plundering estates for food crops; that some protesters had lost their lives and others were jailed. The thread of memory linking past to present was that of sugar workers creating an islandwide crisis by engaging en masse against the plantocracy. This was my first awareness of the selective role of memory, the underground oral currents that carry it forward, and its role in shaping the present action.

By the fourth week I began to wonder what would bring workers back to the canefields. The answer came a week later when the board of inquiry began its hearings. Its chairman requested sugar workers to end their strike, assuring them that the board was fully apprised of their grievances. This brought about a slow drift back to the canefields, with the pattern as formless as the initial work stoppages had been. Workers were aware that recommendations of past boards of inquiry had always favoured workers. They also wanted to favourably impress the board.

By the beginning of the sixth week croptime activities were fully resumed with factories grinding to full capacity. A full account of the hearings, published daily in the newspaper and reported over rediffusion, was followed closely by villagers. The board's findings were a masterpiece of compromise and reconciliation. It upheld the three-year wage agreement, criticising the union for not honouring it. But it noted that given the sugar industry's 'windfall' profits of the previous year, it recommended workers be given an ad hoc bonus increase of seven cents per ton in addition to the regular wage increase for 1958, thus bringing the total to the 15 cent increase originally requested by the union and demanded by workers. Because of the recalcitrance of the sugar industry to make known their profits, the board recommended there be an immediate investigation into the nature of their profits and that a new formula for fixing wages be

found before next year's negotiations.¹⁷ All sides agreed, and all sides felt they had won. Workers believed this result could not have occurred without their wildcat strike and that their strike had actually strengthened the union's position vis-à-vis the sugar owners who now had to make public information about their profits.

Labour Resistance, Labour Politics and Social Change

The 1958 wildcat strike was a dramatic event displaying an unprecedented islandwide unity among sugar workers. It was a unity that relied on informal means of achieving consensus, on local understandings and sanctions, on village-based notions of 'unity', on a communication network of lorry drivers and rediffusion, and on workers' race/class understandings of Barbadian society which included their historical consciousness of past protest events. It entailed a direct confrontation with the sugar owners, and an initial indirect confrontation with the BWU and the ruling government party. The conflict brought into play the differing class segments of the society, highlighting the tight integration of Barbados's race/class hierarchy. It both captured and reflected a number of on-going changes in the labour politics of the island.

While overlooked in the social history of Barbados, the 1958 wildcat strike was an important part of the process through which change was occurring. It was catalyzed not only by a demand for living wages, but also by a claim for a share of the extra 'windfall' profits of the sugar industry. The windfall issue constituted a new demand in workers' ongoing struggle for economic justice; it represented a new area of entitlement. It was a demand they won, mainly through their 'silent' direct action. Their action strengthened the BWU's ability to act on their behalf and forced the government to bring in outside sources to assist in resolving the conflict. The 1958 strike notified other social sectors that sugar workers would have to be taken into account in a new way. Workers had asserted their right to have a 'voice' about their economic demands.

The strike made clear that labourers were keenly aware that they, the largest and most oppressed segment of Barbados's labour force, had a role to play in continuing the fight for economic justice. They drew on past protest and bargaining strategies and responded to the repositioning of power that had occurred on the national level. It was an instance of direct democracy where workers took an independent role in the political process.

The significance of the 1958 wildcat strike must be placed in the context of changes that had occurred since the 1937 rebellion and the labour politics of the period that followed. To understand what led to the strike being islandwide, one must return to 1946. Following the 1945 sugar workers' work stoppages, the locus of decision-making with respect to issues concerning labourers shifted from individual estate owners to the national level, where they were now settled through negotiations between the BWU and the SPF. Aware of this, sugar workers responded in 1958 by setting the unity of their action against the unity of plantation owners. Workers were also responding to the new political importance they had gained, knowing that their allegiance and support were now of concern to both the union and the new political parties. They now had organizations at the national level which, if pressed by direct action, could be forced to take workers' views into account.

The strike dramatized historical changes. It was followed by serious work stoppages in the sugar industry over the 1963–1964 'windfall' profits.¹⁸ Again workers decided that the share they were being offered was inadequate and they refused to cut cane. According to Wynter Crawford, who was the DLP labour minister at the time, while the sugar owners got their share, the BWU wanted to claim the share belonging to workers. They wanted to use the funds to create a Rehabilitation and Welfare Fund for sugar workers. However, the sugar workers wanted their money in their hands. Both Crawford and the opposition party (now the BLP) stood behind them. After futile efforts at a settlement, the DLP-led government gave in to the demand of the sugar workers. During the 1960s similar work stoppages which began in protest against decisions

made by union leaders have been reported. But now the threat of a strike action was often sufficient to cause union leaders to reverse their stand and concede to the demands of workers. And in the spring of 1968, the union itself, breaking its no-strike policy on sugar estates, called a strike.

By 1968, however, sugar was no longer the mainstay of Barbados's economy and the percentage of sugar workers in the total labour force was rapidly dropping. It continued to decline so that 30 years later there were no more than two to 3,000 sugar field workers during the 1998 crop season, half of them still being women. A total crop of 60,000 tons was produced¹⁹ which by 2003 had dropped to only 39,000 tons, signaling the near end of an agricultural working class that had been the single largest and most oppressed group of workers throughout Barbados's 376-year history.

I have retold the story of the 1958 strike in order to give voice and visibility to Barbados's sugar workers whose active role as players in grassroots struggles for economic justice has not yet been memorialized. Nor have their bargaining strategies and forms of self-empowerment been sufficiently appreciated. Also silenced is the fact that when referring to agricultural labourers in Barbados, we are talking about a labour force in which nearly half of the workers are women. I wondered if the silence surrounding their strike action in Barbadian histories of political resistance was due to the absence of an identifiable leader among the sugar workers, the absence of the violence that occurred in the earlier protests, or because the strike was embarrassing to the new trade union and political leaders. Whatever the reasons, it has been the historical consciousness of the sugar workers that has prompted me to put the story of their 1958 strike in the historical consciousness of the present generation of workers.

Today Barbadian workers face different, more complex, and more unequal economic configurations. The lessons they can learn from the 1958 wildcat strike are indirect since there are so few people in the agricultural workforce. Nonetheless, what the analysis of the strike reveals is workers' views of democracy and that direct democratic

action can be effective as well as empowering. As Barbadian workers today continue the fight for economic justice under new circumstances, they, like the sugar workers of 1958, can gain strength and resolve by drawing on what can be learned from past struggles fought by the island's large agricultural labour force of slave-based and then wage-based sugar workers.

* *Acknowledgments:* Thanks to my intellectual posse – Susan Barrow, Mary Chamberlain, Nina Glick Schiller, Antonio Lauria, and David Sutton – for their comments, and to Hilary Beckles for suggesting that I excavate the story of the 1958 strike from my dissertation.

Notes

1. This research, carried out during the summer of 1956 and from September, 1957 to October 1958, was supported by funding from RISM (Research Institute for the Study of Man) and Population Council's International Division.
2. In Barbados's steeply-sloped colour/class hierarchy, class terms were used interchangeably with racial assignations, which did not always reflect phenotypic differences in skin colour. The class status terms in use at the time of my research were 'whites' for the planter-merchant class, 'coloured' for the middle class, and 'blacks' for the very large working-class population. That terminology has shifted somewhat in recent times to encompass the 'coloured' middle class in a broader concept of 'black' people (vs. 'white' people).
3. Nigel Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean: The Social Origins of Authoritarianism and Democracy in the British Caribbean*. (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001).
4. Glen L. Richards, "'Dribber Tan Mi Side": Creolisation and the Labour Process in St. Kitts-Nevis, 1810-1905' in *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture*, eds. Verene A. Shepherd & Glen L. Richards (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002), 203.
5. Hilary Beckles, 'The Slave Labour Elite and Antislavery in Barbados' in *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture*, eds. Verene A.

- Shepherd & Glen L. Richards (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002), 186.
6. Nigel Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean: The Social Origins of Authoritarianism and Democracy in the British Caribbean*.
7. See Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados: Amerindian Settlement to Nation-State*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); 'Radicalism and Errol Barrow in the Political Tradition of Barbados' in *The Empowering Impulse: The Nationalist Tradition of Barbados*, eds. Glenford Howe & Don D. Marshall (Barbados: Canoe Press, 2001); *Chattel House Blues: Making of a Democratic Society in Barbados* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004); Glenford Howe & Don D. Marshall, eds. *The Empowering Impulse: The Nationalist Tradition of Barbados* (Barbados: Canoe Press, 2001).
8. Hilary Beckles, *A History of Barbados: Amerindian Settlement to Nation-State*, 173.
9. Francis Mark, *The History of the Barbados Workers' Union* (Barbados: BWU, 1966).
10. See C. Y. Shephard, *Barbados Cane Cutting Enquiry* (Barbados: Advocate Co. Ltd, 1946).
11. Woodville K. Marshall, *I Speak for the People: The Memoirs of Wynter Crawford* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 70-71, 77.
12. By 1946, the BWU was negotiating with the recently formed Sugar Producers' Federation on behalf of sugar factory and estate workers. They had become the main intermediary between workers and management.
13. While the 1958 strike is mentioned in the 17th Annual Report of the Barbados Workers' Union (1958), and briefly referred to in accounts of the labour politics of this period (see Mark 1966, Beckles 1990, Marshall 2003), the only full account of its unfolding and dynamics is in my dissertation, *The Scene of the Action: A Wildcat Strike in Barbados* (PhD diss., Columbia University, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1969), 197-246.
14. The rapid diffusion of information among geographically dispersed cutting teams throws an interesting sidelight on the communication networks that existed during crottime. With concentration of sugar processing in fewer factories (19 at the time), the factories became a nodal point for the lorry drivers, who took the cane from the scattered fields to the factory, to meet, exchange news and gossip, and carry it back to their cutting teams in the fields. As one cane worker put it: 'news of the strike traveled like a telephone message carried by lorry drivers'.
15. As general secretary of the BWU (from 1948 to 1991), Frank Walcott was a visible leader. He later became an internationally acclaimed trade unionist

and a highly influential political figure in Barbados. He was knighted and recognized as one of the National Heroes of Barbados.

16. Hilary Beckles, *Chattel House Blues: Making of a Democratic Society in Barbados* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004).
17. See A.F. McKenzie, Report of an Inquiry into the Sugar Industry of Barbados (mimeo), 1958 ; Barbados Workers' Union Seventeenth Annual Report (mimeo), BWU, 1958.
18. Francis Mark, *The History of the Barbados Workers' Union*, 166–168; Woodville K. Marshall, *I Speak for the People: The Memoirs of Wynter Crawford*, 134–136.
19. Robert L. Morris, deputy general secretary of the BWU and director of industrial relations (Interview at 'Solidarity House', September 14, 1998).

The Cuban Agrarian Reforms of 1959–1966: Roots and Vital Forces

John Dumoulin

In this paper I examine the Cuban agrarian reforms of 1959–66 in one locality, which I shall call *La Niña*. I discuss the activity of sugar workers during this period along with pertinent historical background. My findings are based on the field research I carried out in this locality from late 1962 to 1966,¹ complemented by microhistorical research on the background of the labour movement in the region.

A few general considerations will be useful to begin with. As in other parts of the Caribbean, colonial rule, plantation production, and slavery had shaped Cuban society and sugar was still dominant in the twentieth century. Cuba was distinguished in the Caribbean by her Hispanic-American traditions but also by a relatively late economic and demographic development and the large geographical areas occupied by sugar cane. Most important was the existence of a Cuban national state, fraught with postcolonial contradictions that threatened its sovereignty and integrity. Nonetheless, having their own state was perceived by Cubans as their great historic achievement. This was a general feeling, not limited to ambitious politicians. The national state was expected to be the means to procure stability and prosperity for the island. These were vital goals for the vast majority and particularly for workers in sugar.

While continuing to dominate Cuba's economy, sugar, after the mid-1920s, had become a notoriously unstable source of employment. Sharp fluctuations in sugar markets had brought chronic incertitude into the lives of Cubans. Uncertainty and