

CARIBBEAN WORKERS' MOVEMENT

Research Note

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October is Black History Month in the UK

The struggle within the **Campaign Against Racial Discrimination** and the transformation of the pressure group towards advocacy of Black Power in late Sixties Britain needs no retelling as it was recorded in *The Politics of Powerless* (Heineman (1972) IRR/Oxford University Press). That account explored the personalities and issues involved. This note looks outside it three years tumultuous existence to focus on the drivers of radical change identified in the standard narrative as Johnny James and Ralph Bennett. Both men were founders of the London-based **CARIBBEAN WORKERS' MOVEMENT** in 1965. Bennett was general secretary; James, head of publications. Both were political workers for Labour Party activist, Dr. David Pitt in his Greater London Council (GLC) constituency of Hackney. (In 1975 Prime Minister Harold Wilson was to appointed Pitt to the House of Lords as Lord Pitt of Hampstead). They were co-opted at Pitt's insistence onto the Executive Committee of C.A.R.D. – Campaign Against Racist Discrimination. James was assistant general secretary for membership and chairman of the International Committee. Their impact on the civil rights lobbying group reflected the growing radicalisation of self-organisation and political advocacy within Britain's immigrant communities against the racist discrimination experienced in British society. The turn to community action was not as new as contemporary commentary would suggest. What was heard loud and clear was the anti-imperialist sentiments and concerns expressed.

Johnny and Ralph were both editorially involved in the single sheet one penny newsletter published from 1965 to 1967 by the Caribbean Workers Movement. In August 1965 the *Caribbean Workers' Weekly* editorial asked:

“What are the principles which guide truly socialist actions? What would be expected from Socialist leaders, parties and groups?

The overriding feature of their policies and actions must be the furthering of the interests of

all working people against their implacable enemies, in our case world imperialism led by US imperialism and British Imperialism with their local stooges.”

(Caribbean Workers' Weekly Vol 1 # 7 August 1965)

Reflecting left-wing Marxist attitudes of some of what are now referred to as the ‘Windrush Generation’, the newsletter covered a wide-range of topics, including parliamentary democracy, economic power, maintenance of the colour bar, Caribbean politics, and the use of British military forces in the Caribbean. The publications of the CWM was concerned with promoting ‘true’ socialism to the island countries, to campaign for national independence, to defeat the common enemy – imperialism, led by the ruling classes of the USA, Britain, France and others and domestically, reflective of their internationalism, to participate *“in all anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-fascist activities for the benefit of working classes in all parts of the world, thus playing our proper role in the international working class movement against imperialism.”*

The first issue of *Caribbean Workers' Weekly* appeared July 1965 with the front page news calling for ‘Hands Off Dominica’ and comments on Jamaica’s economy and the Commonwealth Conference. The reverse has thinly-detailed article on the Klu-Klux Klan in Britain, and more substantial piece on ‘US aggression in Vietnam’. That formula was repeated in subsequent issues.



The focus of the newsletters was mainly on Britain and those in power in the Caribbean – articles on the use and abuse of political, policing and military powers, as well as corruption and financial largesse within capitalist regimes abound – but wider global concerns are reflected too, with many articles and cartoons attacking the pernicious influence of the United

States in Caribbean affairs. An editorial on parliamentary democracy wrote of shedding illusions in the wake of “*what flimsy structures these imperialist devised constitutional institutions proved to be.*” Economic power it asserted remained with the monopolists, and it questioned the treacherous Caribbean leaders “*how much easier the job of imperialists is made with local stooges to do the jobs for them.*”

The Vietnam War, the rise of Black Power in the USA, and the Cuban Revolution and its support for those overthrowing the Anglo-American imperialist yoke are all covered. Its audience was those who “*escape from overwhelming unemployed and destitution by emigrating to the metropolitan country as cheap labour.*” [The Carib Vol.1 No.5 February/march 1965]

Amongst the activities it carried were advertisements for film shows of Cuba’s “Island Aflame’ in the Labour Hall in Stoke Newington, and a fund-raiser party at Benthall Road both in the North London N16 district. There were monthly meetings at the Lucas Arms, the venue that marked the open declaration of the anti-revisionist movement with the creation of the Committee to Defeat Revision, for Communist Unity that some members of the CWM had been involved in. The CWM, working in a similar field, continued to reflect those early anti-revisionist concerns with the Caribbean Workers’ Weekly exposing an activist, P.Sealy, as “*a Caribbean stooge of the revisionist CPGB*” [Caribbean Workers’ Weekly #41 April 16-23rd 1966]. The opposition to the politics of “The British Road”, the CPGB’s political strategy was evident in the position taken by the CWM on domestic and international issues. The newsletter argued, “*there is no fundamental difference between the Tories and Labour government since they both want capitalism.*” [Caribbean Workers’ Weekly #38 March 26th-April 2nd 1966].

Vietnam was a weekly solidarity feature carrying reports on the war and agitation support. There were explicit and trenchant criticism contained in its articles. Typically, the article, headlined “Struggle – defeat Imperialism” wrote of the “*bloody nature of imperialism, particularly US imperialism*” and the need to “*distinguish false friends from true friends... We are struggling resolutely for unity among Caribbean anti-imperialists.*”

Using the mimeographed technology of the day, the CWM produced other literature, along with the demanding schedule of the weekly *Caribbean Workers’ Weekly*. There was the CARIB that carried more lengthy Marxist analysis. *The Carib* saw its first issue in July 1965, a stencil and staple publication of roughly 12-16 pages, published with the then recently re-badged tag ~ Caribbean and Latin American Workers.

The Carib generally appeared every two months (although it had gaps through an irregular publication schedule). There was a series called Caribbean Organisations for Mass Political Education, which covered scientific socialism and Caribbean history.

Originally from Guyana, in north-eastern South America, Johnny James, active within the London Left, had contacts with other small left-wing pro-Peking organisations in London. Principal amongst them was another anti-revisionist group, the **London Workers’**

Committee led by elderly general practitioner, Dr Alexander Tudor-Hart, which produced the monthly *Workers' Broadsheet*. The radicalising **Universal Coloured Peoples' Association** led by Obi Egbuna, a Nigerian-born novelist, playwright and Marxist- pioneer of the Black Power movement in Britain. See: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.secondwave/bufp-blf.pdf>

Along with these groups and individual supporters, Heineman argues that for varying reasons related to internal IWA (GB) politics, James also secured the cooperation of the **Indian Social Club** in Southall in the struggle to transform CARD into a more militantly active organisation. He judged that James, the “40-year old accountant” communist, had always been orientated towards realising radical change in the home islands than towards eradicating discrimination in Britain. [Heineman (1972) *The Politics of Powerless*. IRR/Oxford University Press p197]

An alternative evaluation would illustrate the cross fertilisation within London's anti-revisionist milieu as James, preceding his emergence at the contentious CARD convention in 1967, had an established political record that included involvement in the Communist Party as a London District Committee member from Stoke Newington. Johnny James had been expelled from the Communist Party of Great Britain. James, along with 14 signatories had associated themselves “with the principled stand” and “fundamentally correct 'Appeal to All Communists'”, *Vanguard*, newspaper of the **CDRCU**, critics of the revisionist communist party, carried a statement in solidarity stating the party leadership had substituted insults for serious political discussion, indulged in “vulgar lies” “damaging slanders,” “scurrilous practice”.

ACTIVE IN CDRCU

After the departure of the editorial team of Evans and Jones, Johnny James was a named editor of *Vanguard* (along with Dave Volpe, Jack Seifert, and Michael McCreery). The fluid nature of parts of the anti-revisionist movement in London was illustrated by some of the dual membership held at that time by *The Carib* editorial team. They were simultaneously active in both organisation sharing similar political outlooks and orientation. It was not only in the pages of *Vanguard* that displayed their sympathies: Paul Noone, John James and Dave Volpe were the CDRCU's platform speakers for the release of arrested Indian communists at a Conway hall meeting in March 1965.

Carib was advertised in *Vanguard* (Vol1 #9 October 1964) and carried a three part article by James described as a lecture to “advanced cadre of the Guyana National Liberation Movement”. (See: Vol 1 # 8&10). In his article “We Must Fight Racism”, James wrote unsurprisingly dismissively of government initiatives,

“Let us call upon the Labour Government to act against racism not just talk: and let us expose it when it fails to act. Only the mass struggle of the people can stamp out racism and Fascism.” <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/vanguard/1-11.pdf>

Ahilya Noone (of Carib’s editorial team) submitted articles on Cuba and a substantial piece called “Women under capitalism” raising the demand “to free her from the shackles of domesticity” (*Vanguard* Vol 2 #1 January 1965). Not only her and James’ presence provides evidence of the symbiotic relationship as Paul Noone, also on the editorial team of *Carib* (and later a member of the London Workers’ Committee) joined Vanguard’s editorial team after McCreery’s death, However John James was no longer on the editorial team by the start of 1966. His comrade Paul Noone was still there but his published article “Some Methods of Work” [Vol 3 No.1 1966] was headed “Polemic”.

Noone shortly departs amidst the disintegration of the CDRCU. Work continued on *The Carib* before its demise sometime in 1967. That year developments within the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination had preoccupied the activists’ time.

James was once more in the public limelight with the events at CARD labelled as one of the dangerous Maoists. James *“always wore a Mao button on his lapel”* according to Diane Langford’s memoirs, a volunteer in the CARD office.

CARD’s November Convention

The influence of the input of grassroots radicalism was evident at the third annual convention of CARD at Conway Hall on November 4th 1967. Delegates gathered before posters of radical organizer Robert Williams, who advocated armed Black self-defense, and Pan-Africanist organiser and Kenyan Independence leader Jomo Kenyatta. They stood before signs that reflected some mantras of CARD’s early history, declaring, “Outlaw racial discrimination. Provide effective laws,” but also ones that imagined new features for the organisation, including one that stated, *“Black Power means liberation, not integration as third-class citizens.”* [Kennetta Hammond Perry (2016) *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race*. Oxford University Press p240]

Reflecting a consciously internationalist approach to anti-racism that would incorporate the struggle against imperialist rule, the radical coalition clashed with those whose domestically orientated approach was limited to state-sanctioned integrationist measures. In line with [the words of Mao Zedong](#), *“The evil system of colonialism and imperialism arose and thrived with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of the black people”* James contended that the majority who viewed their plight as part of a wider freedom struggle were frustrated by what he described as *“white liberals and a few Uncle Toms”* who did not support internationalising CARD’s mission.

The Convention ended with the election of a new, predominately Caribbean national council, described in a hostile media, in the words of Anthony Lester QC, a member of the Society of

Labour lawyers and one of the defeated leaders, as “*a racist takeover*” of CARD. In a press statement issued in November 1967 by Johnny James, one of the organisation’s newly-elected militant black leaders, had all the hallmarks of a Black Power perspective.

“Let it be quite clear that I do not like speaking to the white imperialist press reporters’, James began, ‘because by nature they have to lie and distort everything one says to carry out the orders and wishes of their masters’?”

(Quoted in Rosalind Eleanor Wild (2008) ‘Black was the colour of our fight’ Black Power in Britain, 1955-1976 p74 ~ PhD Thesis University of Sheffield)

At the following December’s delegate conference David Pitt retained the chairmanship of the organisation but the liberal minority abandoned the organisation, and walked out.

In the aftermath of CARD, the activists were united in the London Workers’ Committee, which emerged from the demise of the CDRCU and fusion in 1966 of the “Islington Workers’ Committee” with a group based in South London. In May 1968, the LWC formed the “**Working People’s Party of England**” led by a team with an ex-communist veteran from the Spanish Civil War Chairman, Alex Tudor-Hart and with Jonny James as Foreign Relations Secretary. His fellow group member, Dr Alex Tudor-Hart was a new officer of CARD following the routing of the liberals, joining Johnny James (Assistant secretary and organiser), CWM members S. Ennis and Ralph Bennett. And there were other individuals involved from the anti-revisionist movement (like Ranjana Ash) whose contributions were less publicised but no less significant.

END NOTES

The Movement for Colonial Freedom

The centre of CWM activities was a small top floor office near King’s Cross at 374 Grays Inn Road courtesy of the Movement for Colonial freedom, a leading anti-colonialist campaign group and civil rights advocacy organisation. Founded in 1954, headed by Fenner Brockway, it was an amalgamation of the British Branch of the Congress Against Imperialism, the Central Africa Committee, the Kenya Committee and the Seretse Khama Defence Committee. The MCF challenged pro-Empire views within the labour movement and wider British society and sought to make the moral and political case for international labour solidarity and decolonisation. The anti-revisionist London Political Organisation contact address was Evan Gibbon’s, a member of the Communist Party in Vauxhall, who was expelled by the London District Committee in March, 1964. He was on the Central Council of the Movement for Colonial Freedom.

At times the MCF shared its cramped London office with representatives of various independence movements, including the Uganda National Conference, the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union and the Zambian United National Independence Party. This reflected the increasingly transnational political and personal networks of the 1950s and 1960s which involved British left-wing activists and nationalist, socialist and anti-colonialist immigrants and exiles from European colonies present in Britain. The three-way relationship between the Labour Party, the MCF, and the CPGB and the “taint of communism” for mainstream political respectability saw the creation of a number of other single-issue campaign groups,

including among others the Anti-Apartheid Movement (UK), the Committee for Peace in Nigeria (established during the Nigerian Civil War) and British Council for Peace in Vietnam, the Chile Solidarity Campaign Committee, War on Want and the World Development Movement. In 1970 the Movement for Colonial Freedom was renamed as 'Liberation'.

Obi Benue Egbuna (1938–2014)

Nigerian novelist and short-story writer, educated at the University of Iowa and Howard University, Washington, DC. He lived in England from 1961 to 1973, where he became involved in the Black Power movement. Radical and impassioned, *Destroy This Temple: The Voice of Black Power in Britain* (1971) describes his spell on remand in Brixton Prison and the general political turmoil during this time. The problems he encountered when he returned to Nigeria are described in *The Diary of a Homeless Prodigal* (1978). He retained his Pan-Africanist politics throughout his life. His first novel, *Elina* (1978; first published as *Wind versus Polygamy*, 1964), caused great controversy in its sympathetic portrayal of a polygamous chief. Other novels include *The Minister's Daughter* (1975), which sets a young student against a corrupt government minister; and *The Madness of Didi* (1980) in which the eponymous former priest and college professor, a thinly disguised self-portrait, is a hero to the young, but due to his radical past faces suspicion when he returns to his native village. All Egbuna's novels display a sardonic sense of humour, as did his play *The Anthill* (1965). His collections of short stories include *Daughters of the Sun* (1970), *Emperor of the Sea* (1974), and *The Rape of Lysistrata and Black Candles for Christmas* (1980).