

ABSTRACT

This study of the role that the labour movement has played in the political process in Trinidad and Tobago is concerned mainly with the period 1937 to 1950 although the first chapter, which sets the stage, goes back to the end of the First World War.

That conflict stimulated democratic sentiments throughout the world, and, upon his return to Trinidad, Captain A. L. Cipriani resurrected the Trinidad Workingmen's Association (TWA) in an effort to inculcate these values into the minds of the mass of Trinidadians. Personality and ideological conflicts soon developed within the TWA and by 1936 Cola Rienzi and Uriah Butler had broken with the constitutionalist Cipriani to form more radical organisations.

Economic ills plagued the island and these factors were complicated by the existence of a fragmented political culture which pitted the prosperous and powerful whites against the deprived blacks (both Indian and Negro) at all levels of society. Butler drew the people's attention to these inequalities, and in June 1937, ignoring Cipriani's call for a constitutional solution to their problems, they staged island wide strikes and riots that saw the birth of mass political consciousness.

In line with this new consciousness, labour organisations, designed to harness the power of the masses, emerged. The previous economic organisation of the society however, along with personality, geographical and extra-societal factors combined to encourage multiple trade unions, and the colonial advisers did their best to de-politicise the mushrooming unions.

Nevertheless, the labour movement succeeded in the course of its normal activity in making a significant impact on the political process as the strikes and disturbances of 1946-1947 showed.