Tubal Uriah “Buzz” Butler
THE MAN AND HIS TIMES

Tubal Uriah Butler has been immortalized as the founder of the trade union movement in Trinidad and Tobago. His contribution is recognized each year with the observance of the national holiday of Labour Day on June 19th.

While working people were agitating and mobilizing for better wages and working conditions since 1919, following the return of soldiers from the West India Regiment, it was the Labour Riots of 1937, led by Uriah Butler, that was the catalyst for the much needed change in working conditions. This exhibition highlights the unfolding of events during the 1937 Labour Riots and the role of Uriah Butler.
BIOGRAPHY

Tubal Uriah “Buzz” Butler
1897-1977

Born
Tubal Uriah Butler was born on January 21st 1897 in Bluggo Cottage, Georgetown, Grenada.

Education
Butler attended St. George’s Anglican School in Grenada which had a high reputation. Butler’s father was a sexton at St. George’s Anglican which gave Butler this opportunity.

War Service
At age 17 he volunteered in the first contingent of British West India Regiment and then served in the First World War in Egypt and Palestine.

Following his return from the war, he formed the Grenada Representative Government Movement and the Grenada Union of Returned Soldiers.

Butler’s Move to Trinidad
1921 – Butler moved to Trinidad attracted by the flourishing oil industry. He worked as a pipe-fitter at the Roodal Oil fields. In 1929, he sustained an injury in the oil fields which left him with a permanent limp.

1922-1931 - Butler became actively involved in the Moravian Baptist Church and by 1931 he became the Church’s chief pastor.

Emergence as working class leader
1935 – Butler joined Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani’s Trinidad Labour Party (TLP) (formerly called the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association -TWA) and in March led a hunger march from the Apex oilbelt to Port of Spain for higher wages and improved working conditions. This marked the beginning of Butler’s emergence as a working class leader. In 1936 Butler left the TLP and formed his own party.

1937 – He organized a sit down strike which proved to be the catalyst for future labour movements. The turning point of the oilfield workers’ riot began when police attempted to arrest Butler while addressing a meeting on the evening of June 19th. Oilfield workers clashed with police officials which resulted in a bloody battle. Fourteen (14) people were killed, fifty nine (59) wounded and hundreds arrested. Among the casualties and injuries were several police officers notably Sub Inspector William S. Bradburn who was shot and Corporal Charlie King who was beaten and burnt. On September 9th Butler surrendered. He was tried and freed on the charges of sedition but was jailed for two (2) years for inciting riot.

1939 – In May 1939 he was released from jail but in November Butler was arrested and detained as a security risk under the defense regulations during World War II. He spent six (6) years in detention on Nelson Island and was not released until the war was over in 1945. On his release from jail, Butler intensified his efforts for home rule and social justice.

1946 – Butler called a general strike.

1947 – Followers of Butler gathered in Port of Spain and stormed the Red House and as a result Butler was expelled from the Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU).

Political Career

1950 – The Butler Party won a seat to represent St. Patrick West in the Legislative Council.


1958 – He ran for Federal Elections and was defeated by Hussain Shah.

1961 – He ran for General Elections and contested the La Brea seat.

Achievements
1970 – Butler received Trinidad and Tobago’s highest award ‘The Trinity Cross’ for his contribution as a labour leader and reputation as a fighter for the people. He was regarded as the hero of the people.

1972 – June 19th, the anniversary of the Oilfield Workers’ riots of 1937, was declared an annual holiday by Act 19 of 1972 and is celebrated as Labour Day.

1988 – The Princess Margaret Highway was renamed ‘The Uriah Butler Highway’ in his honour.

Death of a Hero
1977 – Butler died on Sunday 20th February 1977. He was given a State Funeral and buried on February 24th at Fyzabad.

Sources:
Trinidad Guardian. “Oilfield strikers clash with Police.” June 18th, 1937. P. 1
Butler emerged as a labour leader after he led the 1935 strike at the Apex Oilfields. His efforts to agitate for higher wages and improved living and working conditions amidst the rising cost of living, intensified after he formed his own party – the British Empire Workers and Citizens Home Rule Party in 1936.
From 1936-1937, Butler mobilized workers and held public meetings throughout the oilbelt. In May 1937 he was arrested and charged with inciting riots and with sedition following his speech made to workers in Fyzabad. He was summoned to appear on 17 June but failed to appear. On 19 June, police tried to arrest him while addressing workers in Fyzabad but his followers resisted his arrest.
Trinidad Guardian

Ban on Agitation and Intimidation

MEDIATION COMMITTEE SET UP

MORE PEACE PLEAS FROM THE AIR

WIDE POWERS TO ENSURE PUBLIC SAFETY IN TRINIDAD WERE GIVEN TO HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR UNDER THE (CERTAIN BRITISH POSSESSIONS) ORDER IN COUNCIL 1928, WHICH WAS PROCLAIMED TO BE IN FORCE IN TRINIDAD AFTER AN EMERGENCY MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL YESTERDAY MORNING.

The first regulation made by the Governor under the order was one prohibiting intimidation or agitation of non-striking workers under penalty of 30 days' imprisonment.

A mediation committee, comprising the Hon. H. Nandy, the Acting Colonial Secretary, the Hon. A. K. V. Barton, the Collector of Customs, and the Hon. T. M. Keshab, O.B.E., elected member of the Legislature (Victoria), was also appointed to receive representations from strikers and workers.

Leaflets containing the announcement of this Committee and a further appeal from the Governor to all strikers to return to work were dropped from airplanes of Airco and R.M.A. over country and oilfield districts again yesterday.

To sum up, Mr. Governor, stated the statement that strikes who return to work before the strike is settled will be subject to punishment, and given his support that workers who have not been guilty of any breach of the criminal law will not be prosecuted.

His Excellency also addressed two meetings of his Executive Council, the Hon. H. Nandy, and the Hon. A. K. V. Barton, to the South, to get in touch with both employers and workers with a view to bringing about a reconciliation. They left for San Fernando last night.

OILFIELDS PAY DAY

Meantime, strikes, which so far have led to a toll of 15 dead and more than 50 wounded, continued peacefully in number yesterday.

Ceremonies to be held at the British Oilfield Trust in Port of Spain, and at Trinidad Leasing, Ltd., in Pointe-a-Pierre and at Korn Oilfields in Guapo.

Prompted by the news that the fate of the strikers will be decided by the government, many workers returned to work yesterday, and strikers returned to work under supervision of the Salvation Army, with the Mayor of the Port.

Complete deadlock now seems to have been reached in negotiations for settlement of all other strikes. Oilfield workers are determined to hold out and are insisting that Sir Arthur Butler represents them at any conference.

Both Oil Company executives and Government equally determined they will not negotiate with Butler, however.

No further negotiations were reported yesterday for settlement of the Harbour Scheme, and new Treasury workers' strike in Port of Spain.

Trinidad Guardian June 21, 1927.
BUTLER’S ARREST AND TRIAL

After the riots, Butler fled into hiding and emerged three months later under an agreement to testify before a visiting British Commission. He was subsequently arrested and jailed for two years. In May 1939, he was released from jail but in November he was arrested and detained on Nelson Island as a security risk under the defense regulations during World War II. He was released when the war was over in 1945. He continued his plight for social justice and served on the Legislative Council from 1950-1961.
CONSEQUENCES

Growth of trade unionism

- Working class consciousness intensified.
- The 1937 Labour Riots led to the growth of a modern trade union movement along British lines. By the end of 1938, there were ten trade unions in Trinidad, more than in any other West Indian colony. They were:
  - All Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factory Workers’ Trade Union
  - All Trinidad Transport and General Workers’ Trade Union
  - Amalgamated Building and Woodworkers’ Union
  - Federated Workers’ Trade Union
  - Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU)
  - Printers’ Industrial Trade Union
  - Public Works and Public Service Workers’ Union
  - Railway Workers’ Trade Union
  - Seamen and Waterfront Workers’ Trade Union

Labour legislation improvements

- In 1938 the Trade Disputes Ordinance was enacted. This law provided machinery for settlement of disputes after collective bargaining had broken down.
- In 1939, the Government amended the 1932 Ordinance to legalize peaceful picketing and give unions immunity from actions for damages arising out of strikes.

Initiation of development and welfare projects in British colonies

- Forster Commission Report
  1937 - A Royal Commission of Inquiry appointed to enquire into the cause of the disturbances recommended among other matters the formation of a Labour Department and the establishment of an Industrial Court.

- Moyne Commission recommendations - basis for development
  1938-1939 – The West India Royal Commission headed by Lord Moyne investigated conditions in the colonies as labour disturbances had broken out elsewhere in the West Indies. Its recommendations influenced British policy after 1939 with improvements in health services, housing, and social services, with limited constitutional change and support for trade union development.

Sources:
Ryan, Selwyn. Race and Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago: a study of decolonization in a multicultural society, University of Toronto Press, Canada, 1972.
The 1937 Labour Riots and its aftermath became the subject of several calypsoes in the thirties. The tradition of censoring calypsoes was severe after the 1937 and would continue in the years that followed.

Atilla the Hun (born Raymond Quevedo 1892-1962), one of the greatest calypsonians of all times, composed eleven calypsos on the political events in the 1937-1939 period. He was admired for both his eloquence and keen observation of detail. Attila was the first calypsonian to hold elected public office; he was elected to the Port of Spain City Council in 1946.

**Among other calypsoes sung about the riots were:**
- **Strike in Trinidad and Sedition Law** - King Radio
- **Sir Murchison Fletcher** - Lion
- **We Mourn the Loss of Sir Murchison Fletcher** - Executor
- **Fatal Accident of Mr. Nankivell** - Executor

**King Radio – Sedition Law**

“if a man want to be versed in politics
He have to be plucky with the lot of tricks
He has got to use a little diplomacy
Mix up with commonsense and psychology.”

**Attila the Hun – The Strike**

“the strikes and riots, tho’ i wasn’t there
Was a most regrettable affair
I’ll now entertain you with a song
But i don’t know who is right or who is wrong….
…All I know is that the wages too low
And tribulation the workers have to undergo
And we know – we all know the times are bad
We want better conditions in Trinidad.”

**Attila the Hun – The Commissioner’s Report**

examine the report of the Forster Commission.

“A peculiar thing about the commission
And their ninety-two pages of dissertation
Is that there is no talk of exploitation
Of the worker or his condition
Read through the pages and there is no mention
Of Capitalistic oppression
Which leads me to entertain the thought
And wonder if it is a one-sided report.”

**Attila the Hun – Mr. Nankivell’s Speech**

A song in honour of Nankivell, Acting Colonial Secretary under Governor Fletcher at the time of the riots.

“He spoke feelingly and strikingly
Logically and conscientiously
His diction was perfect, elocution great,
To describe his speech words are inadequate
He said: “They who plant the cane and dig the oil
And develop the estates with their sweat and toil
While employers are living luxuriously
They should not be dying in misery.”

…..His speech created a great sensation
And was welcomed by the population.
There’s a rumour he will be recalled
For by the Commissioners he has been blackballed
But even if he be a million miles across the sea
Beloved in our hearts he will be
For the entire multitude
Offers him their undying gratitude.”

**Atilla the Hun – The Governor’s Resignation**

“In my opinion Sir Murchison Fletcher
Was our ablest Governor
We only wish the Downing Street authorities
Would send more men like him to the West Indies
His resignation was a shock to me
Regretted throughout the Colony
Sir Murchison Fletcher will ever be
Beloved in every Trinidadian’s memory
For he proved in sincerity
His interest in the welfare of this Colony
We must foster local industry, said he,
And augment the island’s prosperity
It is no wonder it is with regret and pain
We learn he ain’t coming back again.”
