Political ambitions and contributions to trade unionism: 
Tubal Uriah ‘Buzz’ Butler during the 1930s and 1940s

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Abstract: This article explores the contributions of Tubal Uriah ‘Buzz’ Butler to trade unionism and party politics in Trinidad and Tobago during the 1930s and 1940s. When Butler decided to reside in Trinidad and Tobago in January 1921 he had already distinguished himself in leadership positions in socio-political organisations in his homeland - Grenada. In 1931 he joined the TWA (Trinidad Workingmen’s Association) which was led by Captain Arthur Cipriani, one of the returned soldiers whose interests included self-determination for the West Indian colonies. Dissatisfied with Cipriani’s leadership, Butler left that Association in December 1935 and joined Adrian Cola Rienzi in founding the Trinidad Citizens League (TCL). Butler, of African descent, became disillusioned with the TCL and on 1 August 1936, he founded his own organization - the British Empire Workers and Citizens Home Rule Party (BEW+CHRP) which eventually replaced the TCL as the major opposition voice on political matters in the colony. The Party’s primary efforts were centred on workers’ interests in the oilbelt of South Trinidad from where Butler, who referred to himself as the ‘Chief Servant’, rose to prominence in 1935. During the 1940s, Butler was a major force among the working class as evident in the growth of his trade union. Similarly, by gaining seats in the election, Butler proved to be a political force which colonial authorities began to fear.

Introduction

When Tubal Uriah ‘Buzz’ Butler decided to reside in Trinidad in January 1921 he had already distinguished himself in leadership positions in socio-political organisations in his homeland- Grenada. He was the founder of the Grenada Union of Returned Soldiers and member of the Grenada Representative Government Movement. Butler was a volunteer in the British West Indies regiment in World War One. In 1931 he joined the TWA which was led by Cipriani, one of the ‘Returned’ soldiers whose interests included self-determination for the West Indian colonies.

Dissatisfied with Captain Arthur A. Cipriani’s leadership, he left the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association (later changed to Trinidad Labour Party) in December 1935 and joined Adrian Cola Rienzi in establishing the Trinidad Citizens League (TCL). In evidence before the Forster Commission, Butler stated, “I was not expelled from the Labour Party as stated by Sir Murchison Fletcher. The Minute Book of the local Fyzabad Branch Trinidad Labour Party can support my statements.”¹ This was in response to Fletcher’s earlier claim, in the Legislative Council, regarding Butler’s expulsion.² Soon, he became disillusioned with the TCL and on 1 August 1936, he founded his own political organisation- the British Empire Workers and Citizens Home Rule Party (BEW+CHRP)³ which eventually replaced the TCL as the major opposition voice in political matters in the colony. The Party’s primary efforts were centered on workers’ interests in the oilbelt of South Trinidad from where Butler rose to prominence in 1935.⁴ This article will examine the involvement of Butler in party politics and his monumental contribution to trade unionism in Trinidad and Tobago.

Publications on the role of the Labour Movement in Trinidad and Tobago in 1930s and 1940s

The role of the working class and political newspapers as educational tools should not be
underscored. In Trinidad and Tobago, the apathy of the élite was visible in the newspapers as the 
*Trinidad Guardian* and *Port-of-Spain Gazette*,
especially in their refusal to publish positive articles on Labor. The limited coverage of the 
colony’s labor movement meant that working class organs as the *Labour Leader* and *The People*
performed the role of educating the masses. These newspapers would be replaced by 
*The Clarion* and *The Vanguard* which emerged during the post-World War Two era.

There is considerable secondary literature which highlights Butler’s involvement 
during the 1937 riots which began on 19 June at 
Trinidad Leaseholds in Forest Reserve and 
Fyzabad. These works include O.N. Bolland, 
*The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean*, 
Rhoda Reddock’s *Elma Francois*, Sahadeo 
Basdeo’s *Labour Organisation and Labour 
Reform in Trinidad, 1919-1939*, Bukka Rennie’s 
*History of the Working Class in Twentieth Century Trinidad and Tobago*, W. Jacobs’s 
*Butler versus the King* and Kelvin Singh’s 
*Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State-Trinidad 
1917-1945*. Also, Ron Ramdin in 
*Chattel Slave to Wage Earner* provided a generalized account 
of the early origins of Trinidad’s working class 
movement with emphasis on the 1937 riots.5 
Nyahuma Obika’s *An Introduction to the Life and Times of T.U.B Butler* focused 
overwhelmingly on Butler’s role on 1937.6 This 
semi-biographical work lucidly illustrates 
Butler’s contribution to labour development in 
the post-1937 era and the formation of his trade 
union. In 1987, Roy Thomas edited *The Trinidad Labour Riots of 1937*, which was a 
compilation of articles produced on the occasion 
of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1937 labour 
riots.7 This edited study embraced a variety of 
themes inclusive of ruling class response, factors 
leading to the riots and the resultant 
investigations and commissions.

Other historians who examined the 
1930s included Susan Craig with *Smiles and 
Blood*. She focused on the socio-economic 
cleavages between labour and capital and the 
attitudes of the ruling class which created a 
volatile environment for the social eruption of 
1937.8

### Butler: The Trade Unionist and Politician

Butler’s political party and also his trade union, 
the British Empire Workers, Peasants and 
Ratepayers Union (BEWP+RU), were the 
primary agencies through which he extended his 
influence both in labour and politics during the 
1940s. The BEW+CHRP, founded on 1 August, 
1936, with headquarters at Fyzabad junction, 
began its work with “rank and file activity” in rural areas.9 The Party was supported through a 
membership fee of one shilling and weekly 
contributions of one penny. During 1936-1937, 
public meetings in various oil districts 
constituted its major strategy of mobilisation and 
education of workers. Indeed, there was a 
oticeable police presence at several of these 
meetings.

The BEW+CHRP functioned primarily 
as a working class movement with a political 
and an unmistakable trade union agenda. Butler 
enumerated the objectives of his Party and his 
vision for the working class when they would 
become:

> “...drillers, production bosses and so 
forth in the oilfields, inspector in our 
constabulary...(with) protection for our 
jobs and from the indiscriminate black-
listing, fining, checking and laying off 
of workers by employers without 
otice...We want Legislation to protect 
workers from discriminating company 
doctors...that the unemployed be 
declared legally free for the whole of his 
term of unemployment from payment of 
taxes, water rates, bicycle licences... 
and that he be given a free ticket to 
travel on the train to look for work. The 
aim of my party is to oppose and 
support legislation affecting the workers 
of the country and inhabitants of the whole."10

Social and community problems were 
addressed by the Party as evidenced in 1936- 
1937 when residents of Sobo and Vessigny were 
given notices to leave their houses built on lands 
owned by Trinidad Lake Asphalt Company and 
the Antilles Oil Company. Furthermore, some 
of the affected persons were workers who lived
in mud huts and laboured for the Asphalt Company for fifteen years. In that matter Butler held discussions with Howard Nankivell, the Colonial Secretary, before whom he made representation on behalf of workers and aggrieved farmers.\textsuperscript{11}

The BEW+CHR\textsuperscript{P} seemed dormant during the eighteen months (December 1937-May 1939) of Butler’s imprisonment on sedition charges; and the Party’s affairs remained in the hands of the Deputy Leader of the party, Benjamin Ramsarran. For more than twelve years, Ramsarran, also the General Secretary, remained a close associate of Butler.\textsuperscript{12} Upon release from prison in May 1939, Butler met an Oilfield Workers’ Trade Union (OWTU) which “...had taken root in his absence and...competently led by Rienzi.”\textsuperscript{13}

Hero-worshipped by the African working class and driven by a sense of messianic mission, Butler saw himself as a legitimate leader of the laboring masses. Therefore his ambition was to replace Adrian Cola Rienzi as President-General of the OWTU.\textsuperscript{14} It was no simple task for the OWTU to integrate “…the charismatic leadership of Butler with the organisational leadership of Rienzi.”\textsuperscript{15}

Indeed, in the creation of a new Executive post for Butler, that of “General Organiser,” the Union attempted to use the talents of both leaders despite the apparent “competition between Butler’s militancy and Rienzi’s reasonableness.”\textsuperscript{16} This experiment with the dual leadership of the Union collapsed when, contrary to the decision of the Executive, Butler on 26 July 1939, instigated an unauthorised strike at Trinidad Lake Asphalt. The Union had previously concluded an industrial agreement with the Asphalt Company and advised its members to desist from strike action. Butler’s deliberate defiance of the Executive resulted in his expulsion from the OWTU on 4 August 1939.

After his expulsion from the OWTU, Butler denounced his detractors at a public meeting in La Brea. In so doing he exposed his aggressive and domineering personality, his intolerance of rivals, and his unwillingness to work with them at the leadership level, “...comrades I have nothing against Rienzi but I am fighting against bad principles. My 2 political enemies are Moses and Rojas. They nearly kill Blades because he shook my hand. The biggest crooks are Moses and Rojas. Rojas is a traitor—I told him so to his face at Fyzabad—he has to die a traitor’s death.”\textsuperscript{17}

Butler formed a rival union which attracted a considerable number of oilworkers from the OWTU\textsuperscript{18} and as President-General of BEWP+RU he initiated a membership campaign throughout Trinidad to attract workers from every industry. But recruitment efforts were most successful primarily in the oilfields where Grenadians worked.\textsuperscript{19} Ten years after the 1937 strikes, an unofficial poll indicated that more than 80% of oilworkers rejected the OWTU as their bargaining body.\textsuperscript{20}

Bukka Rennie contended that Butler’s Party and his trade union existed conterminously, “The Mass Party and the Union were one structurally, functioning under either banner according to expediency. Most people joined the Mass Party and the Union at the same time....”\textsuperscript{21} Dalley indicated that an audit of the union’s books and accounts revealed they were “inexpertly kept” and “…it is doubtful whether any satisfactory trade union accounts could be kept with an organisation like Mr. Butler’s which become alternately a “Party” and a “Union” as suits his purposes.”\textsuperscript{22}

During the wartime incarceration of Butler from November 1939 to April 1945, the public activities of the Party and Union were minimal except for the work of a few branches such as those at La Brea and Parrylands which represented workers, particularly in their protest action against certain policies of oil companies in those districts. For example, on 9 July 1940, the Point Fortin branch convened a meeting of farmers and other residents to protest the sudden introduction of taxation of livestock on lands of the United British Oilfields (UBOT). The Company had levied taxes on farmers on the grounds that unrestricted grazing of livestock damaged pipelines, firewalls and other oilfield...
equipment. James Lynch of the Point Fortin branch informed members in La Brea that his branch was able to end the taxation of 50 cents per month which was imposed by UBOT on livestock owners.

In its tribute to the workers engaged in the 1937 revolts, the Party accepted a resolution that 19 June be locally recognised as a public holiday. Ramsarran, the Deputy Leader, played an important role in coordinating and advising workers of the various branches. He proposed having a library for the Party and also a Land Settlement Scheme for its members and urged the members to be organised into “a powerful political party” to maintain “civil rights and liberties.” The branches in Oropouche and Fyzabad warned government of the possible outbreak of diseases in these areas due to a poor water supply.

There is evidence to suggest that some measure of organisational structure existed for both the Party and the Union. There was an “inner cabinet” of the party which held meetings to discuss “vital matters” affecting membership and party activities. Furthermore, the central body of the party comprising branch delegates and officers held regular meetings at the Emporium Hall, Fyzabad. Some degree of constitutionalism seemed operative when Ramsarran declared that party elections of 1940 were null and void since Clement Payne, who contested the elections, was not a member of the party.

After Butler’s release from wartime detention, he moved to Port-of-Spain because he was officially debarred from the oilfields and banned from the countries of St. Patrick and Victoria. Neither his imprisonment nor the surveillance of his movement suppressed his interest in workers’ grievances and his ambition to assume leadership of the oilworkers. From Port-of-Spain he continued to consolidate his position in the oilbelt and within two months of the registration of his Union it attracted 600 members of the OWTU employed at Lake Asphalt Company. New claims were made for his union to be recognised as the legitimate union for oil workers. Possibly with a view to splitting the ranks of the oilworkers, and at the same time influencing Butler to adopt “responsible trade unionism,” the colonial government registered his union on 29 June 1946.

Butler used his presence in Port-of-Spain to influence powerful unions such as the Seamen and Waterfront Workers’ Trade Union (SWWTU). In 1946, the dockworkers were engaged in protracted negotiations with the Shipping Association which sparked off a major strike at the waterfront on 8 November, when the Association refused to consider the Union’s demands of a 50% wage increase and a reduction in working hours. He intervened and added an element of militancy to the struggle which the Union’s President, C.P. Alexander, could not prevent. Since the Shipping Association refused to deal with Butler, he promptly instigated a massive sit-down protest at the docks for 27 days to initiate one of the city’s most serious waterfront strikes. The colonial government forced an end to the strike with the employment of 712 non-unionised workers. The strikers returned to work since there were many unemployed persons anxious to take their jobs, and this in addition to his defeat in the 1946 general elections, further indicated the limited appeal of Butler and his BEWP+RU in Port-of-Spain.

In the South, Butler’s formidable opponents, the Oilfield Employers’ Association (OEA) and the OWTU demonstrated their increasing control of the oilbelt. In Port-of-Spain the isolation of the BEWP+RU was reinforced by the estrangement between Butler and Albert Gomes’ Federated Workers’ Trade Union (FWTU). Although the BEWP+RU was accorded official union status and Butler’s wartime detention was considered as martyrdom by the working class, the dominant élites and the colonial government continued to regard Butler as subversive. There was some justification for their caution, since he resumed his militant agitation in the key sectors of the economy—oil and sugar.

Butlerism received a serious shock in late 1946 when subversive elements within the
BEWP+RU suspended Butler and appointed A.P.T. James as President-General. A.P.T. James was First Vice-President of the BEWP+RU. He did not accept the post of President-General and asked for time to consider the offer. This may have been the first major attempt to challenge Butler’s leadership when on 12 December, the Executive suspended him along with Darlington Marshall (Third Vice-President), Lionel Cross (Assistant General Secretary) and Elaine Cazabon (Private Secretary to Butler). Butler and Cross in an immediate press release condemned the unauthorised decision of the Executive, “...this so-called Executive is an unauthorized body of dissidents, the leaders of whom had notices of suspension in their pockets from the union when this meeting was convened.”

Joseph A. Thomas, the Union’s General Secretary, was the leader of the mutinous so-called “Executive” since he challenged the authority of both Butler and Cross concerning action taken on 3 November 1946, when certain officers were suspended or expelled from the Union. Furthermore, Thomas advised all branches of the BEWP+RU to disregard directives from both Butler and Cross “until affairs of the union were resolved.” Dalley noted these internal problems of the union were a result of Butler’s dictatorial approach:

“So far as the officers of the Union were concerned, there was a constant succession of appointments and dismissals. Mr. James, a vice-president, now a member of the Legislative Council, was deputed to make representations on behalf of members to the oilfield employers but was removed for, as alleged by Mr. Butler, being “too co-operative - i.e., with the employers. Mr. Babel, the General Secretary, was displaced in favour of Mr. J.A. Thomas and he in turn by Mr. Lionel Cross all within the space of a few months. Members of the Executive Committee and less prominent men who opposed the “President-General” were treated in a similar manner.”

These convulsions within the Union were short-lived since Butler regained immediate control and demonstrated his authority with the threat of a strike on 19 December 1946, if the OEA failed to meet with him for negotiations. Butler demanded from UBOT a ten cents increase on daily wages. The strike constituted a crucial test for Butler against the combined efforts of the OWTU and the capitalist interests in the oil industry. His support was restricted to a few areas, particularly the UBOT fields at Point Fortin and Forest Reserve where drilling was shut down on 19 December. The OWTU issued leaflets to intimidate oilworkers, advising that strike action would result in termination of employment.

The OWTU and the OEA proved to be more influential during the strike. Although 50% of workers went on strike at UBOT, the strike was less effective at other fields. At the Trinidad Leaseholds Limited (Forest Reserve), 339 out of 1,300 employees went on strike; at Apex oilfields (Fyzabad) there were only 104 strikers out of 1,000 workers and at Trinidad Consolidated Oilfields, 150 out of 750. A communiqué issued by the OEA indicated that only 1,400 workers went on strike out of a total workforce of 12,000 and that oil production was not affected.

The ultimatum given to strikers by the OEA with its threat of job loss, sparked off public demonstrations which involved approximately 1,000 persons at Palo Seco, Fyzabad and Point Fortin. During these protests, there was no substantial support for the strikers whose demonstrations were met with police resistance through the use of tear gas and arrests. Furthermore, Governor Sir Bede Clifford’s proclamation of 30 December banned all processions of ten persons or more with sticks or other weapons on public roads in St. Patrick. By the first week in January 1947, workers returned to their jobs but tensions existed and with the setting of fires to an oilwell in Point Fortin a state of emergency was proclaimed for St. Patrick. Butler was ordered by Clifford to leave the county by Sunday 19 January 1947.
In the debate on the Emergency Powers Ordinance, 1947, Ranjit Kumar was critical of such a drastic decision of the government to impose a state of emergency on St. Patrick:

“At the worst times during the last war there was not thought any necessity for such drastic measures, and it seems now that the war is ended, a state of war is going to exist between the government and the people. If there are acts of sabotage taking place, all the Government really needs is more police and military to patrol the district and maintain peace and order.”

Chanka Maharaj supported the Ordinance, indicating that he hoped it would “prevent the setting of fires, the opening of pipes and the emptying of reservoirs.” Patrick Solomon suggested that the Ordinance should cease to be effective when the situation returned to normal. Solomon, a medical doctor, entered local politics in 1943 when he joined Dr. David Pitt’s West Indian National Party (WINP). Solomon was elected to the Legislative Council in 1946 on a United Front ticket.

Government’s determination to crush the militancy of Butlerism was strengthened in January 1947 when a crowd of approximately 1,000 Butlerites with sticks, stones and bottles demanded to see the Governor. Some of these persons came from the oilbelt when Butler was debarred from remaining in St. Patrick. On the morning of 21 January, baton-wielding police used tear gas and arrested more than seventy-two persons. On the night of 22 January 1947, Butlerism survived an armed attack and police raid on its headquarters in Port-of-Spain, leading to the arrest of 350 men and women and the hospitalisation of two men with gunshot wounds. Butler was not at the headquarters during the raid.

**Butler and the Sugar Industry**

The weak and ineffective work of the All Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factory Workers Trade Union (ATSE+FWTU), the bargaining unit recognised by the Sugar Manufacturers Association (SMA), facilitated the infiltration of Butlerism or the “Butler atmosphere” into the sugar belt. Furthermore, there were other unions with mediocre leadership competing for membership among approximately 25,000 workers who were not as yet convinced of the value of trade unionism. The ATSE+FWTU, although registered as early as 24 November 1937, waited for almost a decade before it was recognised in 1945 by the SMA but this did not deter sugar workers from embarking on intense strike action during the period 1938-1939. Contemptuously ignored by the powerful SMA, the work of the Union suffered and was restricted to Ste. Madeleine where its membership was 1,395. The Port-of-Spain based FWTU represented workers at the Orange Grove Estate in the North and was recognised by the Trinidad Sugar Estates Limited. The activities of different unions promoted the fragmentation of the labour movement in the sugar estates.

Obviously, the stage was prepared for Butler as he pursued his objective to displace the ATSE+FWTU in the sugar belt with his own BEWP+RU. William Knowles suggested that Butler took advantage of the instability in unionism in the sugar industry, “Uriah Butler undermines the strength of existing unions and leads irresponsible strikes to create further confusion...During this period (1945-1948) Uriah Butler attempted to break up the sugar union (ATSE+FWTU) by intimidation and violence...he did cause the employers’ association (SMA) to withdraw recognition from the All-Trinidad Sugar Workers Union.”

Although other unions refused to cooperate and collaborate with him, he enjoyed some measure of support from sugar workers. The Soulbury Commission learnt that the other unions in the sugar industry considered the radical and militant methods and practices of Butlerism to be in sharp contradiction with their principles. The concern for working conditions of Indians was emphasised in Butler’s 1946 manifesto. He claimed “hundreds of frail Indian women” employed on sugar estates were paid a measly rate of 40 cents and 50 cents to perform difficult tasks.

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The ‘Kumar factor’ would have assisted Butlerism because Ranjit Kumar, a Butlerite, was also President-General of the Trinidad Cane Farmers and Sugar Workers Association.\textsuperscript{51} Joseph Seunath served as Secretary and A. Mahabir as the Treasurer. Membership in the Association was 600 in February 1948 and registration as a trade union was initially rejected.\textsuperscript{52} Kumar’s experience was invaluable and critical to Butler’s interest in sugar workers since his Association dealt with a variety of concerns of estate workers, inclusive of wages, living conditions, housing, medical services and education.\textsuperscript{53} As a member of the Legislative Council, Kumar prepared a petition and joined with Chanka Maharaj and A.P.T. James to protest against the Production of Cane Ordinance, 1946. Other signatories to the petition were C.C. Abidh and Victor Bryan who were also members of the Legislative Council. The new legislation with its contract stipulations for the supply of canes to manufacturers was disadvantageous to farmers. On behalf of the Secretary of State, the Soulbury Commission received evidence from Kumar, officers of his Association and A.P.T. James, the Vice-President of the BEWP+RU.

Although Kumar, Maharaj and James were not members of the BEW+CHRP, they worked in close collaboration with Butler. They were independent members of the Legislative Council who were supporters of Butler\textsuperscript{54} and even contested elections as candidates of Butler’s Party. In this sense they were Butlerites. This was a feature of local politics during the early stages of the evolution of the party system when loyalty to party was not obligatory. Although membership in Butler’s party included the taking of an oath, there were no specific requirements for the alignment of prominent Indians with Butlerism. In fact, the Indian presence enhanced Butlerism in its effort to mobilise the Indian working class. The converse is also true of politicians such as Kumar and Maharaj who used their “coalition” with Butler to increase their influence in the sugar belt.\textsuperscript{55}

Butler’s first significant move to challenge the ATSE+FWTU and the sugar companies came with the three week sugar workers’ strike at Caroni Limited in May 1947. Although the Commission reported that Butler “called” the strike, Kumar, apparently on the defensive, told the Legislative Council, “The strike was not fomented by any trade union or individual. The strike was purely spontaneous. It started on the Perseverance Estate near Couva. It is only when the strike had started that I understand Mr. Butler’s trade union heard of it and organisers of that Union went there to see what assistance they could give.”\textsuperscript{56} It is evident that Butler occupied a commanding position in the Caroni dispute since he threatened that if prompt action was not taken then the strike would extend beyond the sugar estates to incorporate other industries.\textsuperscript{57}

The work stoppage seemed more extensive and included much more than merely 1,400 strikers at Caroni as reported by Soulbury and also H.E. Robinson. On the contrary, Ranjit Kumar informed the Council:

“Eight thousand workers were on strike yesterday on the estates of Caroni Limited alone. Eleven estates were completely held up; and each employs an average of 700 workers...exclusive of a number of factory workers, office workers, and workers who work on a contract basis, like private carters...there has also been an expansion of the strike to two neighbouring estates - Esperanza and Woodford Lodge...”\textsuperscript{58}

In supporting Kumar’s motion that the Legislative Council initiate an enquiry in the unrest in the sugar industry, Chanka Maharaj suggested that poor wages in the industry sparked off the disturbances. Gomes accused the Butlerites, particularly Kumar and others who visited the estates, of being instigators, while Abidh defended his union, the ATSE+FWTU, against Kumar’s allegations of incompetence and collusion with the SMA.\textsuperscript{59} With the failure of Butler and Chanka Maharaj to induce oilfield workers to join the strike, and the refusal of the SMA to negotiate with the BEWP+RU, the strike gradually petered out by May 1947.
Butler’s foothold in certain sugar estates motivated him to instigate another wave of disturbances in the industry during the period January-March 1948. The focus was Ste. Madeleine, the second largest estate in Trinidad with one of the largest refineries in the world and a workforce of 5,000 persons. The strike extended for more than two months and resulted in the burning of 20,000 tons of cane and an estimated loss of about 76,000 man days. Governor Sir John Shaw informed Creech Jones, Secretary of State for the Colonies, that the mastermind of the strike was Butler: “From first to the last, no “demands” for increased wages or anything else were made by the workers on the employers…Butler’s motives must be presumed to be…general chaos and disturbance…and to smash his hated rival, the orthodox, but as yet not wholly stable and representative trade unions in both the sugar and the oil industries.”

Butler warned sugar companies of a proposed strike and called for better conditions of employment, higher wages and smaller tasks for estate workers. His intention was a general strike carded for 19 February 1948, incorporating oil and sugar workers. He interpreted the government’s ban on his entering the oilbelt as a ploy to undermine his influence and thus prevent the unity of Indian and African workers: “(I act) at the risk of ‘inciting’ Government to prevent me from ‘mixing freely’ with the thousands and thousands of Indians and Creole Workers in the sugar belt of the country who now hail me as ‘Trinidad’s Mahatma Gandhi’ to the very great grouse of many even as they (government) have quite shamelessly banned me from County St. Patrick up to this date.”

Butler’s influence continued to be a source of concern to the government and to the Employers’ Associations of both the sugar and oil industries. The threat of a general strike prompted the OEA and SMA to begin negotiations with the OWTU and the ATSE+FWTU. In search of a peaceful settlement, the Bishop of Trinidad met with Butler and Mira Sinanan, the legal adviser of the BEWP+RU, and it was agreed to give employers one month to consider workers’ demands.

Although promises were made for improvements, the grace period of one month was interrupted when the SMA refused to negotiate with Butler. At Ste. Madeleine, dissatisfied workers went on strike when the Company began negotiations with Lionel F. Seukeran’s Sugar Workers’ Union. At Cedar Hill 1,000 workers who were on strike requested representation by Butler’s union, “We don’t want Seukeran and his Union to bargain for us, we want the Butlers’ (sic) Union. If Seukeran can get twelve cents an hour increase for us we prefer to accept six cents at the hands of Uriah Butler.”

On 27 February 1948, an estimated 3,000 workers from 18 estates of the Ste. Madeleine Company marched from Cedar Hill to the Ste. Madeleine Office and chanted “We Want Butler None But Butler.” A delegation of Butlerites (Lynch, Pope McClean and Charles Granderson) accompanied by representatives of workers met with E. Johnson, Manager of Ste. Madeleine. They expressed dissatisfaction with the ATSE+FWTU and requested Butler to represent the workers’ interest. Subsequent negotiations indicate that company officials refused to recognise the BEWP+RU. Meanwhile, tensions continued and the unrest spread to the Woodford Lodge Estate in Central Trinidad. In March, 585 cane cutters at Craignish Factory stopped working and joined the strike. Butler then issued his declaration of a strike in both the oil and sugar industries on 14 March 1948: “...I Tubal Uriah Buz Butler by the Grace of God and the Will of the Oil Workers...do hereby proclaim in the name of my Executive that as from Midnight on Sunday March 14, 1948, a State of Industrial Strife exists and that every man and woman, Indian and Negroes, not on ‘essential Services’ in...
the Oil Industry are Ordered to go on a General Strike in a Serious determined Constitutional effort to force the Oilfields Employers Association to pay respect to Our Demands..."66

The announcement of the strike hastened ongoing negotiations resulting in an agreement made between the Sugar Manufacturers’ Federation and the ATSE+FWTU. Once more, the SMA was determined to reject Butler in the negotiation and insisted on the recognition of the ATSE+FWTU. Factory workers were to receive wage increases from 15 cents per hour to 17½ cents per hour plus bonuses while task workers were to obtain an increase of 46 cents to 52 cents per task.67 Similarly, on 15 March, agreements were made between the OEA and OWTU. Accordingly, increased wages were given to weekly paid employees who received $1.50 per week, hourly and daily paid labourers received an increase of 3 cents per hour and the basic wage in the oil industry was adjusted to $2.36 per day.68 There were no major incidents in the oilbelt except when three men were injured by the police in attempts to disperse a crowd of 150-250 persons who intimidated workers at Egypt Village, Point Fortin.

The timing of both agreements successfully short-circuited Butler’s plans for a general strike in both the oil and sugar industries, “Oilfield officials stated the strike called by the Butler Union on Sunday night was nothing short of a failure. One Labour Supervisor pointed out that there was not a single workman employed that had refrained from attending work except due to illness.”69 Similarly, in the sugar areas where disturbances left several burnt-out plantations, the situation returned to normalcy beginning with a full attendance of workers at the Union Hall Estate.70 There were no major incidents of sabotage to equipment and machinery except at Harmony Hall Estate where the scale house and machine shop were damaged by fire.

Nyahuma Obika in An Introduction to the Life and Times of Tubal Uriah Butler attached some significance to the work of Butler in the sugar belt which was not only labour related but also served to “bridge the racial gap” between African oil workers and Indian sugar workers. Initiatives which promoted unity between the colony’s two major races remain one of the most vital contributions of Butlerism to national life.71

Although C.C. Abidh and his ATSE+FWTU and the less visible unions deplored the intrusion of Butlerism into their domain, yet there were sugar workers who accepted Butler’s leadership. The African working class newspaper, The People, reported on the favourable reception Butler received as he visited one of the estates, “On Sunday last (March 7th) the President-General of the Union, the British Empire Workers Peasants and Ratepayers Union, Tubal Uriah Buz Butler; whom the Indian workers now refer lovingly and loyally as Urias Butla Gandhi...visited the sugar belt.”72 Similarly, with reference to the 1948 strike it was reported that “The workers of the entire Estate (Felicity) with exception to the Estate Staff are pledged to carry on the strike and are determined to await instructions from our CHIEF SERVANT, who is the counterpart in Trinidad to (the) great Mahatma Gandhi of India...”73 This view of Butler transcending the race division is reinforced by O.N. Bolland in The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean, “Butler, more than anyone, succeeded in bringing together Creole and Indian Trinidadians, workers from the canefields and the oilfields, the rural and urban poor...”74 And, Khafra Kambon contended that “Butler fought for the ideal of African-Indian unity, and championed the cause of Indian workers with the same love, sacrificial zeal and boldness, that he battled the cause of African workers.”75 Similarly, Lewis argued that Butler was a symbol for all ethnic groups when he was imprisoned during World War Two.76

Early foundations were laid by the TWA for collaboration and fraternity between the working class in the oil and sugar industries. This gathered momentum particularly through the efforts of Rienzi in the latter part of 1937 who, “...discountenanced any attempt by Indians to treat Indian grievances as distinct from those
of Negroes...the struggle was a ‘class struggle’ and the standard of living of the Indian workers could best be advanced with the support of the Negro worker.”

It was Rienzi and oil workers of African descent such as Blades, McDonald Moses, John Rojas and Ralph Mentor who brought unionism to the sugar belt and initiated a new era in African-Indian co-operation. Rienzi and his team conducted meetings in the sugar estates, established branches of the newly organised ATSE+FWTU and informed workers of the advantages of an effective union to interface with the powerful employer class.

Undoubtedly, Butler with the assistance of Ranjit Kumar and Chanka Maharaj, built on the foundation previously laid and added to one of labour’s most significant contributions to the social development in the colony, namely transethnic collaboration on the basis of working class solidarity in periods of economic travail.

The existence of more than 80 branches of his union with elected officers and a governing Central Executive was an indication that Butler’s movement had some degree of organisation between 1946 and 1952. It would be facile to simplify Butlerism as a phenomenon confined to a section of oilworkers in South Trinidad. His movement involved East Indians and Africans of both the sugar and oil industries and to some extent working class activity in North Trinidad. The militancy of Butlerism, which was influenced by Garveyism, inadvertently contributed to employers having more respect for ‘responsible’ unions and also becoming more aware of the workers’ plight. But while his confrontational style and willingness to be incarcerated conferred on him at least temporarily the mantle of martyrdom in the cause of the working class, his erratic behaviour was bound to alienate educated middle class collaborators such as Rienzi.

**General Elections of 1946**

After the first installment of representative government in 1925, Trinidad and Tobago was granted universal adult suffrage in 1946 as the next step towards self-government. The major changes included removal of both age restrictions and language qualifications for electors and elimination of the discriminatory income and property requirements. Although the new constitution provided for an increase in elected membership and parity between elected and non-elected members yet it remained a governor’s legislature and did not provide for an elected majority. The Legislative Council consisted of 18 members: 9 elected, 6 nominated, 3 officials with the Governor as Chairman. The colony received adult suffrage, not self-government, and both the reformers and the electorate were denied the opportunity to radically change the government of the day.

A larger electorate and additional elected members created new political opportunities and intensified rivalry among aspirants. Although there were a few “independents” the majority of the forty-two candidates in the 1946 elections belonged to “parties”. Independents sometimes pledged their support for certain parties e.g. Norman Tang, Lawrence Edwards and B. Nathai were associated with the United Front. La Guerre does not refer to these as political parties, in the classical sense, but “political groupings” sharing similar attitudes to political questions.

Solomon explains that “parties” such as the United Front to which he was aligned, intended to capture all nine elective seats and thus function as a solid bloc to challenge the government’s nine (six nominated and three officials) in the Legislative Council. Indeed, such a plan failed because no “grouping” captured all the seats. There were five such parties, some of which were built on alliances: The United Front was a coalition of David Pitt’s West Indian National Party, the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA) and the Indian National Council. The Trinidad and Tobago Trades Union Council and Socialist Party (TTTUC and SP) embraced the FWTU and the OWTU. The other parties which contested the elections were the TLP; and Butler’s BEW+CHRP.
The composition of the political groupings indicated a preponderance of labour organisations in the contest, and yet, “The single most striking result of the election was the failure of the working class to capture political power.” This was due to the division and keen rivalry among labour candidates which served as the requiem for their failure in the elections. Gomes, Vice-President of the FWTU, summarised the crisis on the labour platform with its “keen and cutthroat rivalry” among the unions and “...ceaseless dissension about all sorts of ideological differences, some real but most of them imagined or manufactured to justify schism.” Various working class organisations repudiated Butler’s militancy while allegations of communist tendencies haunted the OWTU.

Disillusioned and disappointed with the leadership of the existing unions and parties, Butler made no political accommodation. Although there were major collaborative efforts for the elections, Butler’s individualism and Chief Servant messianism excluded the principle of partnership and political alliances. During the campaign for the St. Patrick seat, the bitterness between Butler and the OWTU further intensified the internecine rivalry within the labour movement in the oilbelt.

Ralph Mentor, General Secretary of the OWTU, denounced Butler’s campaign tactics and emphasised the need for the representation of labour in the Council which could be best provided by the Union’s candidate - John Rojas:

“...since the resignation of Mr. Rienzi, the Union had no voice in the Legislative Council. The workers had to make every effort to secure the seat for St. Patrick for a real workers’ candidate in the person of Mr. John Rojas, their President-General. Butler had been stumping their constituency delivering abusive speeches and making indecent attacks...But it was exceedingly remarkable that Butler had not in any of his public speeches made a single attack on Mr. Timothy Roodal who owns or is interested in an oilfield at Fyzabad where the workers employed on the field during the whole of the war period received no war bonus addition on their pay.”

Furthermore, Mentor accused Butler of conducting a campaign based on “reckless, unscrupulous and irresponsible propaganda” against Rojas, “Mr. Butler is villifying and disseminating filthy propaganda against the man who succeeded in getting for the working man the right to vote in choosing Legislative Council members...”

The electoral campaign was replete with promises of social benefits which were given greater prominence than such issues as West Indian federation or self-government. The most common issue in party manifestos was the nationalisation of major industries, particularly oil and sugar, which Butler supported. In so doing, he adopted a position already taken by Cipriani and Rienzi. In his election promises Butler included free lunches, books, milk for children, the removal of bicycle licenses and an increase in old age pensions, while Joseph Mahon, the Butlerite candidate for the Eastern Counties, added protection of civil liberties and public health programs. Butler’s manifesto revealed there were plans by the government to reduce wages and remove the war bonus.

Although Butler’s BEW+CHRP won three of the nine seats, he lost to Gomes in Port-of-Spain North, a seat “where, perhaps stupidly, he decided to contest.” Gomes won the seat with 70% of the votes cast, inclusive of the middle and upper class support in the St. Clair-Newton and St. James areas. Furthermore, a working class area, Laventille, supported Gomes, because of his association with steelband, calypso and the “East Dry-River boys.” His leadership in the FWTU added to
his invincible position against Butler. Undoubtedly, Butler gravely misjudged his popularity as an islandwide hero and was not supported by the urban middle class. But he remained the poor man’s candidate and received most of his 1,984 votes from the urban underclass at Bournes Road, Gonzales, St. Francois Valley Road and Chinatown. Gomes, who had earlier courted the Butlerites, aligned his party with the TTTUC and SP to contest the 1946 elections. That alliance included Butler’s rivals, the OWTU and Gomes’ decision would have been a factor in Butler’s electoral challenge to him for the Port-of-Spain North seat. In a clear case of opportunism, Gomes abandoned the Butlerites and joined a more diverse coalition which offered better prospects in the elections.

The TTTUC and SP suffered a crushing defeat when McDonald Moses\textsuperscript{95} lost to the Independent, Ranjit Kumar, in Victoria. Roodal’s victory over John Rojas, President-General of the OWTU, indicated the continuing influence of Butlerism in the oilbelt. The \textit{Vanguard} expressed the OWTU’s disappointment, “Folks who pretend to sympathise with the workers’ cause ran true to form and came out in true colours...They were out to halt and eventually destroy working class solidarity and they clearly demonstrated their belief in the principle that the ends justify the means.”\textsuperscript{96}

With the inauguration of the new Legislative Council in 1946, labour seemed to be well-represented by Gomes, (of the FWTU), Roy Joseph (President of the Southern Workers Friendly Society trade union); Abidh (associated with sugar workers); Roodal, Chanka Maharaj, A.P.T. James and Kumar were associated with Butler. Patrick Solomon, although associated with David Pitt’s politically-oriented WINP, had established himself as pro-labour during the SWWTU strike in 1946. Solomon was the medical adviser of the SWWTU.

Such a formidable presence of labour in the Legislative Council was no guarantee of cooperation on working class issues. This was evident when Gomes in the Legislative Council supported the government’s decision to use force to break the SWWTU strike. Furthermore, when Gomes and Joseph were appointed to the Executive Council, it signalled the division of the representatives of the United Front, “Almost immediately the Front split into wings - between those who called for responsible government and those who were questioning (its) feasibility....”\textsuperscript{97} The unfortunate tale of labour in the 1946 elections is one of disunity among several workers’ organisations dominated by strong personalities such as Gomes, Butler, Mentor and Rojas. In Arthur Lewis’ assessment, the 1946 elections, belonged to a period of unmistakable individualism characterised by the prominence of political opportunists who flourished because of the absence of any systematic party organisation:

\begin{quote}
“It was the heyday of the political adventurer who as an ‘independent’, promised the moon to a gullible electorate, from increased old age pensions, more scholarships for civil servants, more taxi licences, ‘good and plenty water’ and a promise to ‘demobilize unemployment’...It all portrayed a scandalously low level of political intelligence and a complete failure to think out in any coherent way long-range answers to the colonial problems, and it cried aloud to be replaced with a rational party system based on mass political education...”\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Butler’s fiery rhetoric, eloquent speeches and stubborn will, enhanced his reputation as a fearless hero and as an authentic representative
of the poor and disadvantaged. Nevertheless, he did not possess the sophistication and education necessary to win the confidence of the colonial bureaucrats and local professional élite.

Butler contested the 1950 elections and won the largest bloc in the Legislative Council. However, the prejudices of Governor Hubert Rance denied Butler any further political prominence. It was obvious to Rance that the militant, confrontational and unorthodox leadership style of Butler was not suitable for inclusion in the succession plan of British trusteeship which preferred to entrust governance but only to a politically mature local leadership.

Butler’s coarse political style even alienated him from middle class collaborators in both the labor movement and in politics. Eric Williams in History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago recognised that Butler’s popularity was “undoubted and fully deserved” but his movement failed to survive as a major political force because of its inadequate organisational structure.99 Although Butler was effective in mobilisation of the masses, he was unable to consolidate them “for the capture of political power and for the use of that power when it had been captured.”100

In February 1977, Walter Annamunthodo, a political activist of San Fernando, produced a leaflet for Butler’s funeral. In this brief publication, Annamunthodo believed, “Butler served the working class as best he could and must be considered one of the builders of our nation…He was uncompromising on the question that we can govern ourselves. He could rightly be called the “Father of the Nation”.”101

Endnotes

1 Trinidad Guardian 7 October 1937 (hereafter cited as TG).
2 Hansard 9 July 1937.
5 Ron Ramdin, Chattel Slave to Wage Earner: A History of Trade Unionism in Trinidad and Tobago (London: Martin Brian and O’Keeffe, 1982).
6 Nyahuma Obika, An Introduction to the Life and Times of Tubal Uriah Butler (St. Joseph: College Press, 1983).
7 Roy Thomas ed., The Trinidad Labour Riots of 1937- Perspectives 50 years later (University of the West Indies, St. Augustine: Extra Mural Studies, 1987).
9 Ron Ramdin, Chattel Slave to Wage Earner: A History of Trade Unionism in Trinidad and Tobago (London: Martin Brian and O’Keeffe, 1982), 94.
10 Cited in Jacobs, Butler versus King 57.
11 This was stated in Butler’s defence at his trial on 9 December 1946. I. Jacobs, Butler versus the King 59.
14 Jacobs, Butler versus King, 22.
16 Jacobs, Butler versus King, 22.
17 Sworn statement at Port-of-Spain Police Court by Ashton Williams, Sergeant of Police. He attended Butler’s meeting at Harvest Reaper’s Hall, La Brea on 27 November 1939. Enclosure in Confidential Despatches from the Governor to the Secretary of State 1939. National Archives, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.
18 Ramdin, Chattel Slave to Wage Earner, 146.
20 The People 3 December 1947.
22 Dalley Report 15-16.
23 The People 20 July 1940.
24 The People 3 August 1940.
25 The People 13 July 1940.
26 The People 3 August 1940.
27 The People 19 October 1940.
28 The People 17 August 1940.
29 The People 17 August 1940.
30 If The People is accurate there were 87 branches of the BEWP+RU throughout the colony in 1947. The People 25 October 1947.
31 Jacobs, Butler versus King, 175.
32 TG 13 December 1946.
33 Port-of-Spain Gazette 14 December 1946 (hereafter cited as POSG).
34 TG 14 December 1946. Also POSG 14 December 1946.
35 TG 15 December 1946.
36 TG 19 December 1946.
37 Dalley Report 15.
38 TG 21 December 1946.
39 TG 31 December 1946.
40 TG 21 January 1947.
41 Hansard 17 January 1947.
42 Chanka Maharaj successfully contested the 1946 elections as a candidate for the BEWP+CHRP for St. George.
43 Hansard 17 January 1947.
44 TG 22 January 1947.
Registered trade unions in the sugar industry were the All Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factories Workers’ Trade Union and the Federated Workers’ Trade Union.


Bollard, Politics of Labour, 571.

Hansard 16 May 1947.

Hansard 16 May 1947.

Hansard 16 May 1947.

Bollard, Politics of Labour, 570.


Cited in Bollard, Politics of Labour, 571.

The People 14 February 1948.

The People 28 February 1948.

The People 28 February 1948.

POSG 13 March 1948.

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POSG 14 March 1948.

POSG 16 March 1948.

POSG 21 March 1948.

POSG 21 March 1948.

Obika Life and Times of Butler 134-135.

The People 13 March 1948.

The People 3 April 1948.

Bollard, Politics of Labour, 529.


Electors were to be British subjects 21 years and over, resident in the colony for at least two years prior to registration as a voter and living in the electoral district for a minimum of six months. Jamaica was the first British West Indian colony to be granted universal adult suffrage in 1944. Trinidad was the second to gain suffrage on 1 April 1946.


The Vanguard 9 February 1946.

The Vanguard 16 February 1946.
Journal Articles
