



The Founding of the BITU & The JLP

1938 - THE TURNING POINT

SUNDAY, May 29, 1938 dawned clear, bright and calm in Kingston. Jamaicans all over the island went about their daily routines, but that Sunday was special because in many ways it marked the dawning of Jamaica's two main political parties. The two weeks prior to that Sunday saw the outbreak of much civil unrest throughout the island as unsatisfied workers went on strike.

Bustamante

In that year, workers around the island had recognized as their leader a tall, striking middle-aged man, with a shock of somewhat unruly hair that seemed merely a reflection of his unbridled energy.

Alexander Bustamante, born William Alexander Clarke in Blenheim, Hanover, had made a name for himself negotiating on their behalf, addressing workers and their issues at public meetings and presenting their cases in the nation's newspaper as well as British papers. On Thursday, May 19, 1938, soon after he had negotiated a settlement for Kingston dockworkers, Bustamante was confronted with another dockworker situation. The Kingston dockworkers of the United Fruit Company (UFC) refused to load the ships until their demands for a

wage increase were met but the UFC refused to discuss payment terms until work resumed.

On Friday, May 20, the workers went on strike and all weekend Bustamante travelled from meeting to meeting exhorting the people to stay focused and united and stay on strike for better wages. The strike held and on Monday, May 23, a massive crowd gathered at Parade where Bustamante mounted Queen Victoria's statue and began to speak. All eyes were focused on him as he assured the workers that with this show of solidarity he would be able to go forward and negotiate on their behalf from a position of strength. He called upon the people to go home in peace and stay united. As he descended from the statue, however, a group of policemen ordered the people to disperse and aimed their rifles. Incensed, Bustamante bared his chest and declared, *"If you are going to shoot, shoot me, but leave these defenceless, hungry people alone."* He then called upon the people to sing the National Anthem, God Save the Queen, at which point the police were forced to lower their rifles and stand at attention while Bustamante led the crowd safely away. In spite of his request for non-violence, after that meeting rioting did erupt throughout the city and soldiers were heard firing bayonets.

Grant

The next day, May 24, Bustamante, along with his colleague labour leader and fellow orator, St. William Grant, were remanded in custody by a police inspector. St. William Grant protested and was badly beaten. Bustamante submitted peacefully to arrest.

Bustamante and Grant were charged with inciting unlawful assembling and obstructing the police inspector. They were refused bail and were tormented by being stripped down to their underwear. The news of their arrest sparked numerous upheavals all over the island as workers showed solidarity with their dramatic leader.

On Saturday, May 28, 1938, Bustamante and Grant appeared before the courts and were set free as the judge was afraid of incurring the material and human costs of continued rioting. Upon his release Bustamante thanked his cousin Norman for his assistance and introduced the idea of a trade union (something Manley himself had also spoken of) as a way of organizing and strengthening advocacy for the workers cause. The dockworkers were eventually victorious and the roots of the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) were laid.

May 1965: Donald Sangster and Hugh Shearer ride in a van leading the JLP/BITU Labour Day march through downtown Kingston.

THE BITU

By June 1938 the BITU was a reality opening offices at 30 Duke St. with Bustamante as its president and chief financier. It grew rapidly and eventually moved to 98-100 Duke Street. The BITU included a maritime union (dockworkers, banana carriers, longshoremen), a Transport Workers Union (tram and railway workers as well as mechanics and chauffeurs), a Factory Workers Union, a Municipal Workers Union (government workers) and a general Workers Union (for farmers). Bustamante and his staff, including his assistant Gladys Longbridge (who would eventually become his wife) travelled the length and breadth of the island spreading the trade union message. In December 1938 a new Trade Union Law was passed providing the framework for the modernization of unionism in Jamaica. Early achievements of the BITU include: advocating for the passage of a minimum wage bill, and workmen's compensation, paid holidays, regulation of women's hours of employment, the creation of pension funds, laws relating to slum clearance and the passage of the Trade Union Act of 1939 which provided for mediation, conciliation and arbitration of disputes between employers and employees.

In 1939, however, Bustamante was increasingly at odds with the new governor Sir Arthur Richards who was concerned over the growing power of the union movement and its leader Bustamante. Once again Norman Manley stepped in as mediator and a Trade Union Advisory Council (TUAC) was established, somewhat as a check of the power of the BITU. This council was intended to promote the orderly and progressive development of trade unionism. Manley was the (TU(A)C)'s legal counsel and the chairman was lawyer N. N. Nethersole. The BITU was granted three seats (one of which was held by Bustamante) making it a minority force in a body slated to take over the negotiation of major disputes. The workers were concerned as they felt their choice of a leader was being overlooked and soon enough the BITU and the (TU(A)C) parted ways and at the same time Bustamante's membership in the political party formed by his cousin Manley and Nethersole and others a year earlier, began to wane.

In 1939 World War II erupted and Jamaica, like all British territories, was plunged into a state of emergency under Wartime Emergency Regulations. An internment camp was set up at Up Park Camp where citizens of any countries with which Britain might be at war, as well as anyone considered a threat to the war effort, were locked up. Governor Richards felt that Bustamante's actions in continuing to speak out on the workers' behalf were threatening to the war effort

and when addressing restless waterfront workers in September of 1940 he stated, *"I have stood for peace from the first day I have been in public life, but my patience is exhausted. This time if need be there will be blood from the rampage to the grave,"* that was all Richards needed to order his internment under the Defence of the Realm Act. Numerous strikes and protest marches resulted but Bustamante remained locked up for 17 months acquiring near martyr status. During that time Manley interceded to help maintain the running of the BITU with Bustamante's blessing.

The launching of the JLP

However, when Bustamante was released on February 8, 1942, he decided to act on intentions formed during his imprisonment to build a political party despite the fact that the conditions of his release forbade him to speak in public or to more than 49 persons at any one time inside a building without official permission, and to leave Kingston without notifying the police. Increasingly Bustamante felt that the socialist tendencies of the PNP were not in keeping with his own belief in free enterprise and therefore both his union and the new party would move in a different direction.

PNP members who had become involved with the BITU during Bustamante's imprisonment turned their attention to the Trade Union Advisory Council (TU(A)C) which eventually became the National Workers Union (NWU), the trade union which today is closely aligned with the PNP. In addition, Bustamante recognized that in order to participate and represent the workers in dialogue over Jamaica's New Constitution in 1943 (considered urgent enough by the British Government that they conducted meetings during a war) he needed recognition as a political leader and not just as a labour leader.

The name of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) was chosen as fitting to represent an organization heralded as the banner of the worker's movement. The JLP was described as a party with liberal policies and a progressive outlook that will recognize the legitimate claims of both labour and capital for adequate representation (Eaton, p. 84). On July 8, 1943 it too was launched in front of a massive crowd at the Ward Theatre. Many of the leaders within the BITU, Hugh Shearer, St. Clair Shirley, Lynden Newland, Isaac Barrant, L. W. Rose, Leopold Lynch, Frank Pixley, E.R.D. Evans and others became leaders within the JLP. Critics of the new party called it little more than the BITU with a political title.

Within 18 months, after the declaration of a new Constitution in November 1944 that called for a two-tiered House of Assembly and an Executive Council, and

general elections held on December 14, 1944, those voices were silenced. The JLP won 41% of the vote to the PNP's 23% and the Jamaica Democratic Party, JDP's 4 %. (The JDP was formed slightly before the JLP and represented the interests of employers dissuaded by the socialist leanings of the PNP).

The Jamaica Labour Party's headquarters was once found on Retirement Rd and today can be found on Belmont Rd in Kingston

Sources: Bustamante, G. (1997) *The Memoirs of Lady Bustamante*. Kingston: Kingston Publishers Ltd. Black, C. V. (1983) *The History of Jamaica*. London: Longman Group UK Ltd., Eaton, E. (1975). *Alexander Bustamante and Modern Jamaica*. Kingston: Kingston Publishers Ltd., Sherlock, P. and Bennett, H. (1998). *The Story of the Jamaican People*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers; Troy Caine.

Notes

* The leaders of the JLP have been Alexander Bustamante and Edward Seaga. Donald Sangster and Hugh Shearer were first deputy leaders.

* Sir Alexander Bustamante, who went on to become the first Prime Minister of independent Jamaica in 1962, and Norman Manley, who served as Chief Minister of Jamaica from 1955-59 and Premier of Jamaica from 1959-62, both of whom are now National Heroes, remained political rivals based on mutual respect and admiration for over 25 years. They were opponents but not enemies. Both were committed to democratic ideals as evidenced by Manley's statement welcoming the formation of another party. He called it Sir Alexander's greatest contribution to democracy because in effect it cemented the establishment of a two-party system. When Manley lost his first contest in the 1944 election he took it simply as the wishes of the people and adhered to it. He won his seat in 1949 and never lost again.

* In 1940, Bustamante, at a public meeting spoke the following prophetic words: *"If Mr. Manley cooperates with me as I will with him, that we will do something for this country. I will say without boast that there is no greater power in this country than the combination of Manley and Bustamante...."*

* Bustamante was also related to Edna Manley by virtue of his maternal grandmother, Elsie Hunter.