

CHAPTER EIGHT



The Lewis Demonstration

On Thursday 6 January 1949 there took place a spectacle which shook the humdrum lifestyle of sleepy colonial Barbados. Thousands upon thousands of black workers downed tools and descended on Bridgetown to begin what would turn out to be two days of protest marching through its streets. At their head, beside Grantley Adams, leader of the labour party and its affiliated union, walked the solitary white figure of TT Lewis.

Whatever else the interviews conducted for this book may have unearthed about Lewis and his times, this image is the one emblazoned upon the minds of countless Barbadians of that era. The act was classic for its sheer audacity and irreverence in rigidly hierarchical Barbadian society.

THE MERCHANTS GOT THE MONEY BUT THE UNION GOT THE MEN

Interestingly, this was the first union-based march in Barbadian history against the alleged unfair dismissal of an employee. On the last day of 1948, the flagship publication of the BLP and the BWU, *The Beacon*, blasted Lewis' employers the Central Agency in its lead story: "With brutal and stunning suddenness, Mr Lewis has been given the push, in a manner which makes the Pearl Harbour sneak attack look like child's play. If this is an example of the benevolent manner adopted by private enterprise in the twentieth century, then heaven help us!" And

in a clear exhortation to public action on the matter, it continued: "... for when such treatment can be meted out to an employee who has served his employers long and faithfully and one who has attained a high and responsible position, it is time that the public sit up, take notice and guard against such [an] infringement of justice and fair play"¹

When the news of Lewis' firing broke, contemporary accounts from the BLP/BWU side indicate both a sense of consternation coupled with a determination to meet the challenge being laid down by big business. If Lewis was fired on account of his worrisome connections to the BLP, that fact also proved to be his salvation. Adams quickly rallied behind him and visibly sought to make out of the dismissal an issue of the utmost political significance. Adams would galvanize the response and demonstrate - through the physical presence of thousands of marchers - that the establishment could no longer pursue, unchallenged, what he considered to be a policy of intimidation.

The first step was to stage a torchlight demonstration in Queen's Park, the place where most major political rallies were held in those days. In the Queen's Park meeting on the night of Wednesday 5 January, Adams threatened to halt not only business activities in Bridgetown but also the harvesting of the sugar crop which was just about to start. The latter threat would have caused considerable anxiety since at the time Barbados was a one-crop economy, and that crop was sugar cane.

The next day, Thursday, Adams bid the workers march:

That march on behalf of TT up Broad Street was something that you wouldn't see in any other part of the world. In one section of the march there was a flag belonging to the BWU with a hammer and sickle flying on it. In another part, do you know what they were singing? You'll never guess . . . It was "Onward Christian soldiers!" It was quite an expression on behalf of TT. (Seymour Beckles)

Carrying banners and bearing slogans 'Lewis

**Big Torch Light
Demonstration**

AND

THANKSGIVING MEETING

will be held
under the Auspices of the
BARBADOS LABOUR PARTY
and
**THE BARBADOS WORKERS'
UNION**
at
QUEEN'S PARK
on
WEDNESDAY NIGHT

5th January, 1949 at 7.30 o'clock

The Labour Party will inform the public of the recent dismissal of **Mr. A. E. S. LEWIS**, and the proposed Controversion of his seat for the City of Bridgetown.

Speakers :
Mr. G. H. ADAMS
Mr. M. E. COX
Mr. A. E. S. LEWIS
Mr. F. L. WALCOTT
Mr. T. O. BRYAN
and other members of the Party.

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will not be butchered; 'Lewis victimized, who is next; 'Hitler is dead, kill local fascism, the workers left their headquarters yesterday at 11am and assembled at the open pasture opposite the Empire Theatre . . .²



Lewis (left) and Adams (right) during the march



Marchers passing along the wharf towards Hincks Street

Here is how Hoyos, who witnessed the march, describes the events and the mood of the moment:

I well remember the day in January 1949 when I was driving from St John to Bridgetown. I was flagged down by a mutual friend as I was passing through the parish of St George and told that TT had been dismissed from the job he had held for nearly 30 years. There were tears in the eyes of [my friend] when he gave me the news. After leaving [him], I drove into the city to find it in a state of turmoil and confusion. Thousands of people were marching in demonstration through the streets led by Grantley Adams and Frank Walcott. Without hesitation I joined in the march of protest against what seemed to be a flagrant injustice. My impression then was the same as that of columnist Gladstone Holder, expressed many years later. If Grantley had lifted a little finger, the whole of Bridgetown would have been burnt down that day.³

I was . . . standing on Broad Street. The march was light hearted, almost comical until the Barbados Labour Party top brass came in sight. Orrie Bryan, Cummins, TT Lewis, Mencea Cox were there but they were all dwarfed by Grantley Adams,

looking grim and implacable. It was a moment in local politics that I will never forget. In the hot sun I shivered. As I saw it, Adams held that crowd in the palm of his hand and they would have done anything he ordered them to do. On that morning I saw naked power for the first time. I have abhorred it ever since. No human being should have so much control over his fellows. I've seen no one since possess it in that degree. (Gladstone Holder⁴)

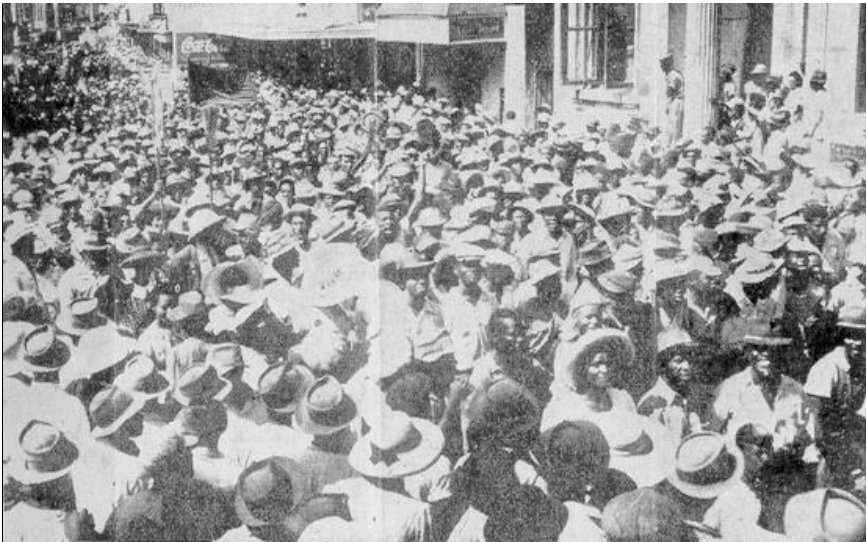
Sir Frank Walcott: That [march] was something massive. In my time, the TT Lewis demonstration was the biggest thing I'd ever experienced. At that time I was very young in politics and TT was a popular person. Colour did not seem to make a difference. As a sportsman he had played cricket and had entreated himself to a mass audience on the cricketing grounds. People therefore saw him not as a white man, but as TT.

Author: Did you lead the demonstration?

Sir Frank: No. In Adams's time there couldn't be any other leadership. As I said, at the time of the demonstration I was very young - 32 in fact.⁵

One of the reasons for TT's popularity was that he wasn't wealthy. In those days some white people really did suffer as bad as the blacks. In fact, there were a whole string of tiny shops all the way along Roebuck Street which were nearly all owned and operated by the small white community . . . Basically all the lower class people suffered the same fate. The Clerks' Union was just half a step above the ordinary porters and workers. Any whites who came out in support of the workers marching for TT would have lost their jobs. But the blacks really didn't have anything to lose. And that is why they marched. (Owen T. Allder)

The preplanned route took the marchers through the heart of commercial Bridgetown. It started from the Labour Party and Union headquarters at the corner of Nelson and Fairchild Streets. It then crossed the Chamberlain Bridge



“Adams walked all round Bridgetown in the hot boiling sun for TT. And once Adams was there, you know everybody would be turning out to support TT too.” (Owen T. Allder)