
Interview: David Abdulah

Trinidad and Tobago unions call anti-IMF general strike

by Carlos Wesley and Katherine Notley

On Dec. 22, 1988, a commission chartered by the Trinidad and Tobago government released its report which confirmed charges first raised in May by Davison L. Budhoo in a six-part open letter of resignation from the International Monetary Fund. Budhoo had accused the Fund of using false statistics to force the government to impose an austerity program. The commission wrote that the consequences of government austerity imposed to satisfy conditionalities based on false statistics were "a) unwarranted adverse judgment of the country's economic performance and national economic management, b) inappropriate policy recommendations by the IMF and those agencies influenced by its economic analyses, and c) international credit problems for Trinidad and Tobago. . . .

"The IMF behaved irresponsibly. . . . Professional ethics, if nothing else, should have dictated that the corrected series be given the same prominence as was afforded the erroneous data."

An immediate cry went up for the government to demand compensation from the IMF for damages, and the rescinding of the 1989 budget, based on the IMF's austerity demands, especially wage-gouging in the public sector enterprises. Rather than do the obvious, the government decided to return to the IMF. The national trade unions are now planning a general strike, the first such action in Trinidad and Tobago since the Great Depression.

On Jan. 23, Carlos Wesley interviewed David Abdulah, educational officer of the Oilfields Workers Trade Union and one of the organizers of the strike.

EIR: We understand that the Oilfields Workers of Trinidad and Tobago are planning to go on strike against the IMF.

Abdulah: Yes, in fact, the entire trade union movement of Trinidad and Tobago, in an unprecedented decision, has decided to take a one-day protest action against the government's economic policies. On Nov. 12 of last year, the government of Trinidad and Tobago signed a Letter of Intent, which established a line of credit with the IMF, under the Compensatory Financing Facility, and this was subsequently followed a full Standby Agreement. Now as a result of that Letter of Intent, the government has committed itself, among

other things, to reduce its fiscal deficit to 4% of GDP in 1989, 2% in 1990, and 1% in 1991. This has meant that the government in all respects has cut the wages of oil, direct government employees, and employees of public utilities which are all state owned, by 10%. This has been a unilateral decision, and it's highly undemocratic and unconstitutional, and the trade union movement is protesting against this, in particular, insofar as the negative impact it has on the free collective bargaining process. . . .

EIR: These measures, you said, are being taken as a result of an IMF agreement. Why has the government decided to go ahead in carrying out this agreement, despite these misleading, or fraudulent, statistics?

Abdulah: The fraudulent statistics were carried out by the IMF in 1985, '86, and '87. As a result of those fraudulent statistics, the government, during that period, made very many economic decisions on the basis of that, on the basis of the IMF analysis and under IMF pressure, which economic decisions have caused a further deterioration in the economy of the country, such as devaluation, wage policies which have reduced the real incomes of working people, introduction of higher prices, and so on. With the further decline in the economy of Trinidad and Tobago as a result of that incorrect analysis and direct fraud, the government now is compounding it with a full IMF agreement. In other words, the damaging of the economy has meant that the economy has declined to the extent where the government was forced to go the IMF formally, whereas before they were not before the IMF formally. The IMF has set us up, to put us under their direct control.

EIR: Has anyone analyzed what the fraudulent statistics cost the economy of Trinidad?

Abdulah: Budhoo did make us an estimate in terms of the loss of potential international credit during those years 1985-87, as well as declines in investment levels, and declines in real income and so on, of people, at somewhere close to TT\$1 billion. Now, it could be more than that, because to quantify that, one has to do quite a bit of quantitative work. Now, in our view, what should happen, rather than the gov-

ernment going to the IMF to seek a Standby Facility and a Compensatory Financing Facility, what we should have done is to seek compensation for the damages done to the economy of Trinidad and Tobago, which compensation would have obviated any inflows under the various agreements. And we then would have been relieved of the harsh conditionalities that the IMF puts on countries that get loans from them.

EIR: What has the government said as its reason for going ahead and negotiating with somebody who already stole TT\$1 billion of your money?

Abdulah: The government position is very weak. We are satisfied that they are politically not prepared to stand up and confront the Fund, or to challenge the Fund, to get a better deal for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And the unions have been putting pressure on the government to take up this kind of strong negotiating position with the Fund. They have not done so, because of their own inability to come to terms with that kind of stance. As a result of that, the unions—in fact as part of our demands, because our demands, upon which we are taking action, go beyond the question of just the government cutting its payroll of public employees—we are talking of all the aspects of conditionalities, including the high prices, and so on, that are taking place: the privatization of state enterprises, etc.

We are also demanding a national referendum on the IMF, because it is our view that the government, when they were seeking the mandate of the population in the general election, did not have, as a part of their election campaign, a position that they were going to take the country to the IMF. In fact, quite the contrary, they were *opposed* to this going to the IMF. Once they have gone there, although they have no mandate to take the country that way, and we are demanding a referendum on the question of the IMF.

EIR: In 1982, an American politician who's currently been jailed for his political views—Lyndon LaRouche—proposed the formation of debtors' clubs, that Latin America get together in a debtors' cartel. It was a proposal taken up also by Fred Wills, former foreign minister and justice minister of Guyana, and has since been taken up by President Alan García of Peru, people in Panama, and elsewhere. Is there such a similar call going up in Trinidad, that you can strengthen your position by joining with other countries in the Caribbean and the Latin American region to negotiate with the IMF in a united stance?

Abdulah: Yes, I think that we support whatever has been said of cooperation between countries of the South who are having their debt problems, to get together and confront the countries up North. Obviously—we know this from a trade unionist's point of view—collective action is always better than individual action, and certainly we would support that. We have in fact held discussions with the President of the South Commission, Mr. Julius Nyerere, and we have indi-

cated our support for whatever he and the South Commission can do. And any others with respect to this. We have also participated in a number of trade union conferences, both Trinidadian and international conferences which have discussed the extent of the problem of the foreign debt. And we have participated in joint regional solidarity conferences on this question. . . .

EIR: Some weeks ago, the leadership of a union that is a counterpart of yours, the oil workers of Mexico, was totally disbanded, its leaders thrown in jail. Joaquín Hernández Galicia, the main leader, was thrown in jail under trumped-up charges of fraud, precisely because the union had confronted the Mexican government on the question of the IMF. What has been your reaction to these police-state measures?

Abdulah: Yes, well, that is something that we as trade union people and as people who are confronting powerful forces have to be concerned with, or live with. In fact, in the last couple of weeks, various government spokesmen have made statements alluding to certain plots to remove the government, and so on. In fact the prime minister himself, in a television interview one week ago, said that the trade unions' intention is to remove the government from power, and that they're not really negotiating as union people, and so on, about union concerns. Of course, that is not true.

EIR: So this is parallel to the Mexican situation, where the government also said in the beginning that it was a plot against the government?

Abdulah: That's right. So that is a response of elites in the society, who are becoming increasingly unpopular and are alienating the masses of the people. Their first response is to become more dictatorial. And wherever governments have embarked upon IMF economic programs—which programs are highly unpopular among the population, because of the severity of their impact on the real quality of life of the masses of the people—the governments therefore have to increasingly become governments to rule by force rather than democratically. We have been seeing to that in Trinidad and Tobago, not as seriously as in other countries but it is a trend, a tendency which comes along with the IMF. We have to be aware of that.

EIR: Any further comments for *EIR*'s readers?

Abdulah: We would like to let you know what happened after the event; it's going to be within the next couple of weeks. People need to know that this is the first time that there has been a call or decision for a general strike since the 1930s—there was one semi-general strike in 1946-47—so that it is really a moment of great historic importance. And we are obviously optimistic, given the response working people and other sectors of the population are giving to us, because they are all very, very unhappy about what the government is doing.