

A Brief History of the Demise of Social Justice

Today in the year 2006, politicians still echo an assurance of Social Justice to win back confidence and trust in their leadership from the working class. No doubt, they are aware that the Nationalist Movement was built with the support of trade union leaders whose foundation came from the papal encyclicals, the Rerum Novarum. In fact, after the PUP won their first General Elections in 1954, Philip Goldson who was minister of Labour got an increase for workers from .36 cents an hour to .46 cents. In the early 1950s, wages earned were far below the cost of living index in the British Colony. Fifty-two years later, the minimum wage is \$2.25 and \$2.00 for agricultural workers. Using \$2.25, that's an average wage increase of .03 cents per annum.

Sixty years ago in 1946, a group of SJC Alumni were invited by Jesuit E. J. O'Donnell, President of SJC to study the Papal Encyclicals, Rerum Novarum on "Capital and Labour" by Pope Leo XIII, May 15, 1891. Together George Price, John Smith, Nicholas Pollard, Sr., Edgar Gegg, Terence Keating formed the Christian Social Action Movement with Narciso Valdez as Moderator. Valdez at that time was the owner and publisher of The Belize Billboard and both Richardson and Goldson wrote for The Billboard. The Church (The Catholic Church) wanted Catholic 'leaders' to carry out the teachings of Rerum Novarum. Hence, Goldson and Richardson who were Anglicans became Catholics. Following the split in the PUP in 1956, both Goldson and Richardson gave up their aspirations to the Catholic doctrine. John Smith had split with Price in 1954, lost to Price in the 1954 General Elections, testified at the Sharp Inquiry in 1954, then left the Country. Edgar Gegg developed his famous store, "The Vogue" and Keating worked elsewhere in Belize City. Narciso Valdez sold The Billboard to Goldson and Richardson after he was threatened with expulsion by the Colonial Office. Valdez was Mexican born.

But why was the Rerum Novarum so important to the Jesuits and their Alumni? The undisputed fact is that the teachings of Rerum Novarum did not support the working conditions in the Colony under Belize Estate & Produce Company which was paying wages below the cost of living index at that time. And why was an American Jesuit chosen to introduce the doctrine? Here is what Nick Pollard wrote: *"The main topic of discussion was the Papal Encyclicals dealing with affairs brought on by the birth of the Industrial Revolution (early 19th century), Marxist Communism, laissez faire economies, Social Democracy – all coming out of the middle or late 1800s. Strangely, never in the course of CSA discussions were the actual terms "Christian Democracy" as a political movement or ideology and its twin action movement, Christian Trade Unions, mentioned. This was probably because Father O'Donnell and SJC were then, as now, U.S.-oriented, and those terms were European in origin."* He continues: *"In fact and in practice, the United States government and people do not like the term "Christian" applied outside of religious institutions, because of their constitutional tradition of separation of state and religion. There are no Christian trade unions and Christian Democratic Party in the U.S. By tradition and inclination, probably dating back to the Protestant Reformation, neither has Social Christian terminology been used in Britain or British-oriented*

countries like Belize and the West Indies. The term and the ideology are largely used and practiced in European and Latin countries where the Catholic Church exerts much influence, although some non-Christian groups in non-Christian countries have adapted and adopted some "Christian" concepts of politics and trade unionism to suit their own needs."

In *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo wrote: "We have addressed you in the interests of the Church and of the common weal, and have issued letters bearing on political power, human liberty, the Christian constitution of the State, and like matters, so have we thought it expedient now to speak on the condition of the working class.....It is no easy matter to define the relative rights and mutual duties of the rich and of the poor, **of capital and of labor**. And the danger lies in this, that crafty agitators are intent on making use of these differences of opinion to pervert men's judgments and to stir up the people to revolt."

"...Hence, by degrees it has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. The mischief has been increased by rapacious usury, which, although more than once condemned by the Church, is nevertheless, under a different guise, but with like injustice, still practiced by covetous and grasping men. To this must be added that the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself."

At the beginning the demise of social justice was demonstrated immediately after the 1961 General Elections. The new PUP government fearing the power of the unions took control of their leadership. It became very apparent that this did not sit well with the Church. In September, 1962, the PUP government allowed the unions to form the National Federation of Christian Trade Unions. Interestingly enough, this came about with the support of CLASC, Confederation of Latin American Christian Unions with headquarters in Caracas, Venezuela who were (and still do) strong followers of the *Rerum Novarum*. Pollard was earlier in 1961 named Executive Secretary of CLASC and formed the Christian Workers Union which replaced the Christian Democratic Union which he formed in 1956 and from which he was expelled in 1958. He was also the General Secretary of the new NFCTU. Goldson had exploded in *The Belize Billboard* and called Pollard's appointment a 'conspiracy *between a high ranking religious leader and a high ranking minister of government*'. Goldson immediately moved to support the more non-Catholic union, the General Workers Development Union which was a merger of Betson's GWU of the 1950s and the British Honduras Development Union which opposed the Southern Christian Union under PUP minister, David McKoy in Stann Creek.

The Christian Trade Unions and its affiliate, the Northern Cane Workers Union began to experience critical land and wage problems in the Sugar Industry in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Jesus Ken who was the Champion of the workers in the Northern districts of Corozal and Orange Walk was removed in 1964 and replaced with Florencio Marin.

Jesus Ken had fought for social justice for the workers in the North but his methods and union ambitions conflicted with the investments of Tate & Lyle (British sugar cane land owners and owners of Libertad Sugar Factory in Pembroke, Corozal – Tower Hill Sugar Factory was not yet built.) and with the investment plans of the PUP. But Ken was also a member of the NFCTU and had attended a workshop with Pollard at CLASC's headquarters in Venezuela in 1962. In 13 Chapters, the Author, Assad Shoman published part of an address that Jesus Ken made in 1964 on radio for Labour Day. Ken said (in part) *“Two worlds are met face to face in this great struggle: **the world of capital and the world of labour**; the world of exploitation and slavery, and the world of fraternity and brotherhood.”* Had he studied the Rerum Novarum on Social Justice?

In 1962, Hercules Powder Company began its pine resin operation and again, because of low wages paid to the union workers, the workers went on strike; Hercules paid the wages that the workers demanded and abandoned its investment and moved to Honduras. Had the Government reverted to the Colonial methods of cheap labour and betrayed the unions? In 1967, the PUP Government signed a secret contract with Pauling & Company (British contractors for the construction of the new capital, Belmopan) which resulted in a 24 day strike at the Belmopan site in May, 1969. Over 2,000 workers from the Christian Unions, the Cayo Labour Union, the Northern Cane Workers Union, the GWDU and the new Democratic Independent Union went on strike. The conspiracy agreed on was to pay the workers cheap wages; the strike resulted in a 25% increase and better working conditions. However, it was a pyrrhic victory for the workers and their unions. Many were fired, they never got to hold a Poll to choose rightful union representation and Pollard was fired by CLASC for being one of the main instigators. His dismissal was requested by a minister of government who accused him of instigating the strike.

Following the PUP's victory at the 1969 General Elections, David Mckoy was removed as Minister of Labour and Kenneth Dunn was fired as Labour Commissioner and replaced with Sam Tillett, a former Police Inspector. Dunn's big mistake was to have called the Poll without the Minister's instructions but swore that the minister authorized it. Dunn claimed he was given the go ahead by the minister. The Poll was called off because the Government's union, the Christian Workers Union would have been defeated at the Poll by the DIU headed by Cyril Davis who later became a Mayor of Belize City. The social injustices dished out to trade union workers had become a trend where ever they challenged the government.

Perhaps, these conflicts may have led to the growth of the non-Catholic union, the GWDU under Thomas Martinez. By 1979, Fidel Castro replaced Tito of Yugoslavia as President of the Non-Aligned Movement; the GWDU had become the United General Workers Union, perhaps as powerful as the NFCTU was in the 1960s. But the UGWU made one big mistake. It moved away from Social Justice to Socialism which in some circles is called Communism. This is very interesting because Nick Pollard was also branded a communist by Bustamante, a prime minister of Jamaica and by an American Arch-Bishop in 1964. In fact, right here in Belize, Pollard was feared by the Private Sector because of his social justice ideology which he adopted from the Rerum Novarum. But the Rerum Novarum does not support socialist unions. It says in another paragraph:

“To remedy these wrongs the socialists, working on the poor man’s envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or my municipal bodies...” It further states: *“ Socialists, therefore, by endeavoring to transfer the possessions of individuals to the community at large, strike at the interests of every wage-earner, since they would deprive him of the liberty of disposing of his wages, and thereby of all hope and possibility of increasing his resources and of bettering his condition in life.”* This is a very strong statement by Pope Leo X111 and it should be very clear that those union leaders who fought for Social Justice under the GWU in the 1950s were not Socialists but men of a strong Catholic Faith.

Catholic trade union leaders had always been attacked because of their Social Justice beliefs but so too has the problem of “cheap labour” been one of the major issues in Belize. In its 1988 publication of “Belizean Studies”, Vol. 16 – No. 3, Laurie Kroshus Medina who held her B.A. in anthropology, and who did her research on the citrus industry of Belize between 1985-86 with her Master’s paper being based on that research, and who received her M.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and, who was enrolled in the Ph.D program at that time, identified cheap labour as a problem. She wrote: *“With independence, the government of Belize has worked to increase its domain over the various sectors of the economy and population at the same time that it promotes economic development. This has meant encouragement of agricultural production for export and maintenance of cheap labour. These goals have manifested themselves in changes in power relations among participants in the citrus industry. Government policies have allowed and assisted the consolidation of power by the CGA and dispersed or prevented the expansion of power by the United General Workers Union.”*

Because of its socialist trade union strategies, the UGWU under the leadership of Mishek Mawema and Anthony Martinez was destroyed by the anti-communist movement that was formed by PUP Ministers and Belizean business magnates with the support of some ministers in the PUP government after the 1979 General Elections. History can relate to this event since, in the aftermath of the 1961 General Elections when the unions were harnessed after putting the PUP in power, the UGWU was broken after it formed a strong amalgamation of the southern and northern unions to put the PUP back in government in 1979.

I think that Social Justice and political power are opposing forces and having more political power in the hands of a few puts less social justice in the hands of the citizenry. There needs to be a greater consciousness of social justice in Belize – this article makes a step forward in that direction.

I could not end this article without quoting what I consider to be one of Pope Leo’s strongest advice and he wrote: *“When a society is perishing, the wholesome advice to give to those who would restore it is to call it to the principles from which it sprang (the Nationalist Movement); for the purpose and perfection of an association is to aim at and to attain that for which it is formed, and its efforts should be put in motion and inspired*

by the end and object which originally gave it being. Hence, to fall away from its primal constitution implies disease (Corruption?); to go back to it, recovery. And this may be asserted with utmost truth both of the whole body of the commonwealth and of that class of its citizens – by far the great majority – who get their living by their labor.”

Nick Pollard, Jr.

PS:

Even though Nick Pollard was terminated by CLASC, it was never revealed how the connection out of Belize through a CLASC representative in the Dominican Republic reached the ears of Emilio Maspero, the head of CLASC, a good friend of Pollard. Did Maspero order the termination? CLASC now CLAT celebrated its 50th Anniversary in 2004. A plaque of honour was presented at that 50th Anniversary in Venezuela with the names of those great trade union leaders of CLASC, among them is the name of Nicholas Pollard, Sr.