INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FJM-28 The Commonwealth Caribbean IV
Black Power

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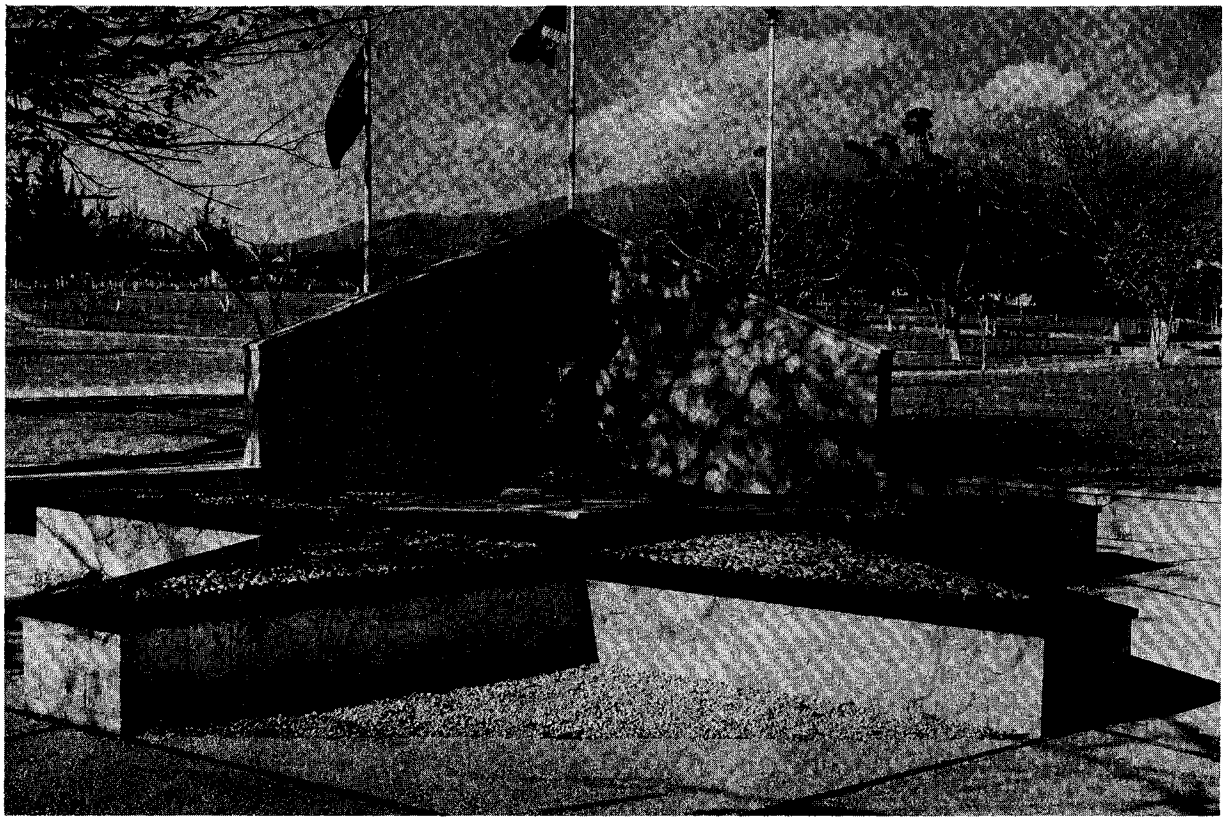
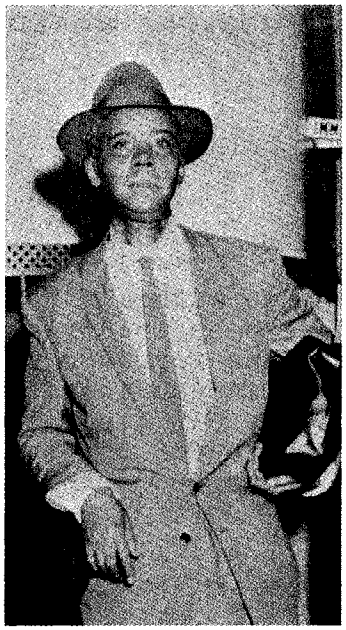
The Caribbean is a home with an African personality. Yet its wealth and beauty have been the privilege or property of Europeans and North Americans for over three hundred years; and all the while, the Afro-Caribbean character of the region has been continuously oppressed. It seems inescapable that this contradiction, dehumanizing both for the oppressor and the oppressed, will have to be radically changed, one way or another.



This newsletter is adapted from a chapter on the Commonwealth Caribbean states included in a forthcoming book, The United States and the Caribbean, edited by Tad Szulc and published by Prentice-Hall.



C.L.R. James

So it is that Black Power has come to the Caribbean, or rather, surfaced in the Caribbean. For the idea of Black Power has been indigenous to the region for 50 years--primarily because of the legacy of two men: Jamaica's black nationalist, Marcus Garvey and Trinidad's pan-Caribbean populist, C. L. R. James. Together, these two represent the source of Commonwealth Caribbean radicalism; and their achievements, acknowledged or not, persist even today in the substance of the movement for regional liberation. During the 1920's, Garvey stressed racial pride, the dignity of blackness, and attempted to organize in Jamaica and the United States. In the 1950's, James tried to mobilize a pan-Caribbean nationalism based on full economic and political participation of the West Indian masses. Both men encountered hostility in their respective islands and both, subsequently, chose exile.

The contemporary Black Power movement began in Guyana during the early 1960's, where a group of Guyanese intellectuals, motivated, in part, by metropolitan attempts to overthrow the government of Cheddi Jagan, gathered to form the New World Group. Within a short period, their discussions appeared in the Group's journal, the New World Fortnightly. Circulated throughout the Caribbean, the Fortnightly eventually sparked the development of similar groups in Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados and the smaller islands. Then, together with the Guyanese group, "Associates" from other Caribbean states fused and started publication of another journal, the New World Quarterly, containing contributions from various groups and written from a pan-Caribbean perspective.

In the Quarterly, the Group's economists, such as Maurice Odle and Clive Thomas in Guyana, Lloyd Best in Trinidad, or George Beckford and Norman Girvan in Jamaica, presented critical work on all aspects of the Commonwealth Caribbean economy: for example,

plantation economies, the mechanics of the Puerto Rican model of industrialization and the structure of foreign control of the contemporary economy. Political scientists within the Group--James Millette in Trinidad or Trevore Monroe in Jamaica--focused on neo-colonialism and demonstrated how current Caribbean politicians have failed to alter the political impotency of the post-independence society. Historians Elsa Goviea, Woodville Marchall and Douglas Hall reinterpreted Caribbean history from the black West Indian's perspective; and sociologists such as Orlando Patterson probed the devastating heritage of colonial culture and slavery.

Then, as the Group's work expanded, its analysis deepened and inevitably proposals for change were presented, always from a regional perspective. For example, Clive Thomas' examination of the Caribbean sugar industry eventually provided the Group with an alternative to the present under-utilization of human and natural resources. Thomas argues that only through diversification (and localization) would there be a halt in the financial drain of repatriated profits, the cost of importing foodstuffs that otherwise might be grown on lands not controlled by Bookers and Tate and Lyle, or an end to the dehumanization of thousands of sugar workers obliged to support themselves and their dependents on $10-$12 a week.

> "As soon as the issue of diversification is raised, the boys throw their hands in the air and shout the question, why use our lands for this if there is other idle land in the community. Put in this way their question raises an even more profound and disturbing issue. How can a poor land-hungry island economy really have 'idle land'? And if this land is idle what are the institutional restraints which prevent it from going into production? My answer in brief is the plantation system and any programme of land tenure reform in the country must be based on the elimination of these private latifundias and latifundistas. It is the plantation system which contributes to the fact that 0.7% of the farms of Jamaica occupy 56% of the total acreage while 71% of the farms occupy 12% of the total acreage."

George Beckford's work on the Caribbean banana industry stresses the need for radical alternatives. He advocates the rationalization of land patterns used to grow bananas and a reorganization of regional shipping and marketing operations.

> Bananas for export are produced more or less indiscriminately in various parts of Jamaica because the industry was grafted on to an infra-structure designed for sugar production and developed by numerous small-holders who had limited access to suitable lands...What is implied is that ... substantial economies could be derived from shifts in

> the location of production. . . such shifts would have several major effects. First, the elimination of marginal producing areas would lower the over-all average cost of banana production. Second, concentration of production would . . facilitate disease control and improvements in technology. Third, the costs of purchasing and transporting fruit to ports would be considerably reduced. Fourth, administration of the industry would be less unwieldy. . . And fifth, production of foodstuffs for the home market could be increased if, as appears, land withdrawn from bananas is suitable for this purpose.
>
> Then, the most obvious way of doing our own shipping and marketing would be to expand the Jamaica Banana Producers Association into a National Line capable of handling the entire trade. One difficulty would be the high cost of new ships. But when one considers that some 75% of current marketing costs consists of freight and commission to marketing agents, it would seem that investments of this type would pay high returns in terms of national income creation. Another solution could be to secure access to supplies from other West Indian islands. One way would be to expand the company with share capital subscriptions by Windward Island growers and partly with capital subscribed by all West Indian governments to transform the company into the West Indian Banana Growers Association. This would be the nucleus of a regional shipping line which would handle more and more of our trade with the rest of the world.

As for the Caribbean bauxite industry, the New World Group argues that under existing organizational and financial arrangements, the potential of the industry has not been fully exploited. The analysis of one of the New World Quarterly's editors, Norman Girvan, shows that relative to its potential, "the bauxite industry's contribution to economic development has been low". Girvan insists that there is need to rationalize the operational structure of the industry in four ways: first, in terms of the financial arrangements, specifically tax agreements made with foreign companies; second, in respect to Caribbean participation in the various stages of aluminum processing; third, regarding depletion problems; and fourth, the manner in which the Caribbean could profit rather than lose from any technological advances made within the industry.

The matter of taxes is a complex problem; but there is evidence that the American aluminum industry has been undervaluing the bauxite they have been mining in Jamaica, and as a result, U.S. companies

have been paying less tax. Specifically, the local American plants have been fixing one price on bauxite for the benefit of the Jamaican Government and another, much higher, for the United States Internal Revenue Service. Figures available suggest that the American aluminum industry or the United States Government owes Jamaica $50 million as a result of this. The problem is a difficult one since bauxite is transferred from one branch to another of the same international company. Thus, the producer cannot be taxed in the normal manner of deducting cost from income. An accounting procedure called "transfer pricing" must, therefore, be used to determine value. As Girvan points out, the Jamaican Government at first "naively accepted the Corporation's evaluations with the result that while the average price of U. S. aluminum rose by 20% and the value of domestic bauxite by 80% the price set on imports. . . hardly changed at all."

The issue of participation in all stages of aluminum processing involves the question of how the Caribbean can share in the increased value of bauxite as it moves from red dust to metal ready for fabrication. As indicated above, the value of the finished aluminum is seventeen times that of the unprocessed bauxite. To date, Jamaica has secured only a very low share of the profits, a consequence of the industry's foreign ownership. Girvan's concern over the inevitability of bauxite depletion is tied to these problems. Since the location of aluminum processing is outside Jamaica, Government has had to encourage the mining of as much ore as possible for maximizing revenue from taxes. As a result, as Girvan figures, "current levels of output with currently known reserves indicate that Jamaica's deposits will be exhausted in 55 years." If output increases, the reserves will be fully depleted within 24 years. This, however, does not seem to be a problem for the multi-national corporation, for:

> When reserves come near exhaustion Kaiser will shift output to Australia and Reynolds will probably shift emphasis to Guyana. Alcoa and Alcan will probably shift to alumina production in Australia as well. Thus by the end of the present century, the Caribbean could be faced with the prospect of secular stagnation of its mineral industry and the retrospect of insufficient exploitation of its potential during its existence.

The fourth point Girvan emphasizes is that any technological innovations produced in the bauxite-alumina-aluminum industry are in the interests of the foreign companies rather than local needs of the Caribbean. Research, for example, on the commercial production of aluminum from clay, is certainly in the interest of companies headquartered in the United States where bauxite reserves are almost depleted. Jamaica would hardly benefit from this type of research, however. Another example is the seeming lack of interest on the part of the North American companies in researching cheaper forms of electricity since in Canada and in the United States these

companies already have sufficient power to operate their aluminum smelters. On the other hand, such a breakthrough is just the sort of innovation Jamaica needs.

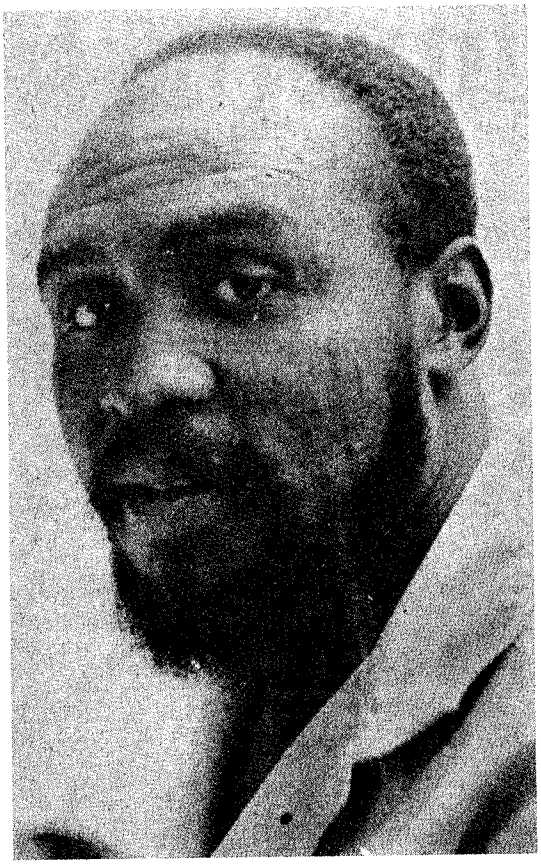
Thus, Jamaica and the other bauxite producers of the Caribbean are totally dependent upon the needs of the foreign corporations now engaged in mining operations within the region. And while the needs of the corporations,profitability and growth, may appear to benefit the states in which they are operating, the reality of the situation is quite different. The profits generated from bauxite are intra-corporate rather than intra-national or regional.

Girvan's proposals mean a change in this pattern. He suggests a regional bauxite-aluminum industry would make use of the resources of the Caribbean in the interests of the member states. A necessary accompaniment to such a rationalization of the area's resources would be a change in the industry's organization. For "even if the suggested production plans were possible under foreign ownership the accrual of profits abroad would remain a major cost." More important for Girvan is the fact that such a re-organization of the industry is "fundamentally prohibited by the structure of the international corporations, whose framework diverges basically from that of the region. . . Organizational rationalization will require that the agencies of resource allocation be the public authorities of the region." That, in short, means localization.

How this is to be accomplished in the face of capital shortage, limited technical personnel, maneuverability and independent markets is yet a subject for debate. The fact that such "re-organization" is necessary is not. Girvan proposes that a "phasing out" of the international companies and a "phasing in" of the regional network be accomplished through a regional shareholding plan under the direction of a regional development program. Acquiring surplus, reorientating technical and eduational programs and developing market contacts with East and West Europe, Asia and Africa, represent portions of the comprehensive plan suggested.

Meanwhile, the Group in Trinidad, particularly economist Lloyd Best, outlined a program "to deal with petroleum and the banks." To begin, Best points out that a re-organization of the economy (that is the placing of economic control of the economy in the hands of the population) "demands two major acts of policy:" first, a settlement with oil and the banks; the second, an emancipation of local enterprise.

> The biggest single problem here is that the petroleum and sugar industries are in the hands of foreign companies and that these companies have interests which



Lloyd Best of Tapia
Trinidad

> are in conflict with those of the nation. We have to resolve this conflict once and for all by localizing these companies and fitting them into the framework of national planning. We have to make it clear that we are intending to break up the huge international corporations. We are not alone in this; other countries are thinking the same way too.

For Best, the objective would be a national oil company as soon as possible. Toward this end, several steps would be taken immediately:

> A separation of Texaco (Trinidad) from Texaco (International); shares in Texaco (Trinidad) must be traded on the local market and made available to the unions, the central government, the local authorities and the public at large. A schedule of jobs which must be held by nationals within a specified period. The accounting practices of the companies must conform to national specifications. All advertising, banking and insurance service must be locally procured.

Then there are the banks and insurance companies. Best insists that these foreign organizations bring nothing to Trinidad that the nation cannot provide for itself. In fact, he shows that they often "stand in the way of rational management of the local monetary system." They would also be localized immediately. The same would hold true for all advertising and the media. This would save the country from a constant stream of American-oriented programming--everything from hair oils to Garner Ted Armstrong's moralizing.

By the fall of 1968, because of the New World Group's work, the intellectual basis for radical change had been presented. But the practical problem still remained: how to actualize the programs given the political context of the Caribbean as it is today. This became a matter of tactics. And it was at this point that the concept of Black Power was introduced into the Caribbean.

In this respect, the most important figure is Walter Rodney, a 27-year-old Guyanese historian, who had returned to the Caribbean from Africa where he had been researching and lecturing in African history. Posted as a resident lecturer at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, Rodney soon gained the respect of his students and associates for his understanding and ability to communicate the history of the African peoples--both in Africa and the Americas. Essential to this history, Rodney explained, was an understanding of Black Power; and it was in this context, in speaking to groups on or off the UWI campus, that Rodney first introduced the term Black Power into the Caribbean.

Lecturing often and well about Black Power, Rodney's greatest assets, his simplicity and clarity, enabled him to communicate with the University community and villagers alike. And it was this ability to communicate from University to village that made the young historian so effective. Black Power, then, became the focus for the first serious contact between the radicalism of the campus and the potential radicalism in the villages. And Walter Rodney was the vital link.

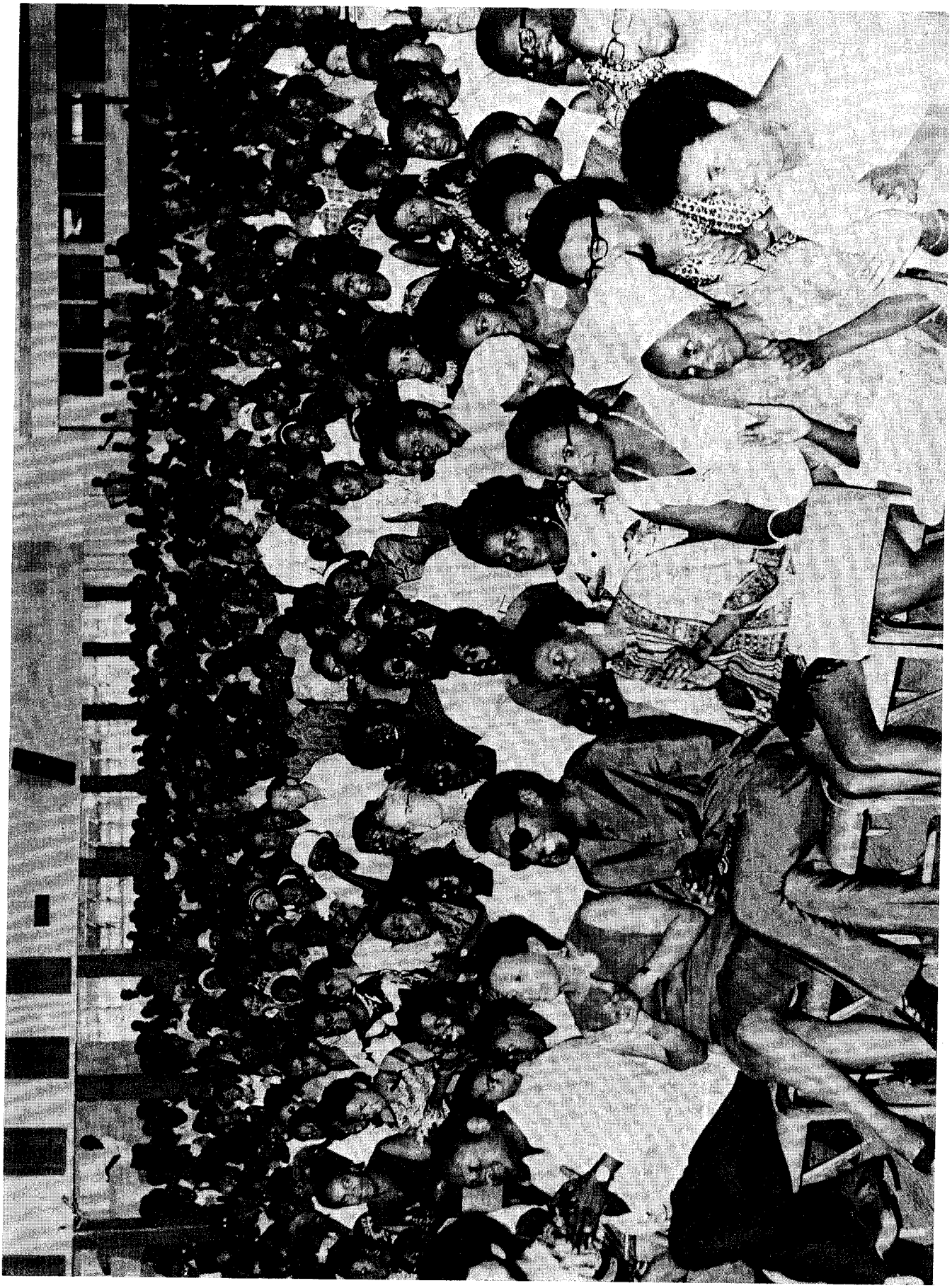
For Rodney, Black Power in the Caribbean meant three essential and closely related things:

> First, a break with imperialism which is historically white racist. Second, the assumption of power by the black masses in the islands. Third, the cultural reconstruction of the society in the image of the blacks.

In response to questions about the definition of "Black," Rodney offered a militant yet tolerant explanation:

> I shall anticipate certain questions on who are the blacks in the West Indies since they are in fact questions which have been posed to me elsewhere. I maintain that it is the white world which has defined who are blacks--if you are not white then you are black. However, it is obvious that the West Indian situation is complicated by factors such as the variety of racial types and racial mixtures and by the process of class formation. We have, therefore, to note not simply what the white world says but also how individuals perceive each other. Nevertheless, we can talk of the mass of the West Indian population as being black--either African or Indian. There seems to have been some doubts on the last point, and some fear that Black Power is aimed against the Indian. This would be a flagrant denial of both the historical experience of the West Indies and the reality of the contemporary scene. It seems to me, therefore, that it is not for the Black Power movement to determine the position of the browns, reds and so-called West Indian whites--the movement can only keep the door open and leave it to those groups to make their choice.

And in defining the second half of the concept, "Power," Rodney stated the simple proposition: "The Caribbean is predominately a Black nation, and as such the blacks have a right to power commensurate with their own numbers."



Stokely Charmichael in Guyana, May, 1970

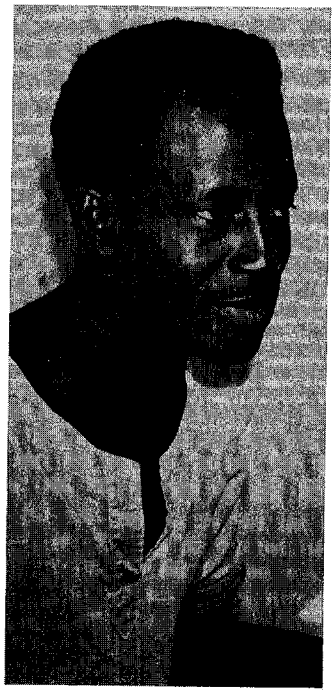
> This is a black society where Africans preponderate. Apart from the mulatto mixture all other groups are numerically insignificant and yet the society seeks to give them equal weight and indeed more weight than the Africans. When we go to Britain we don't expect to take over all of the British real estate business, all their cinemas and most of their commerce as the European, Chinese and Syrian have done here. All we ask for is some work and shelter, and we can't even get that. Black Power must proclaim that Jamaica is a black society --we should fly Garvey's Black Star banner and we will treat all other groups in the society on that understanding--they can have the basic right of all individuals but no privileges to exploit Africans as has been the pattern during slavery and ever since.

Walter Rodney's ability to communicate, greatly imperiled the political power of the Jamaican Government. So much so that in mid-October, 1968, as the young lecturer returned from a Black Writers Conference held in Canada, Jamaica's police were dispatched to the airport with deportation orders. With no official reason ever given, Walter Rodney was banned from Jamaica.

Rodney's appearance, however, marked the beginnings of a tactical shift on the part of the Caribbean radical movement. For prior to Rodney's efforts, the movement had centered only within an intellectual community. It had little impact on the mass of West Indians. After Rodney's departure (since his expulsion, he has returned to Africa) the movement recognized the need to communicate more directly with the people, "to ground with the people" in Rodney's words. So out of this need arose numerous groups and publications directed toward the West Indian masses: for example, Moko and Tapia in Trinidad; Ratoon in Guyana; the Forum in St. Lucia; and Abeng in Jamaica.

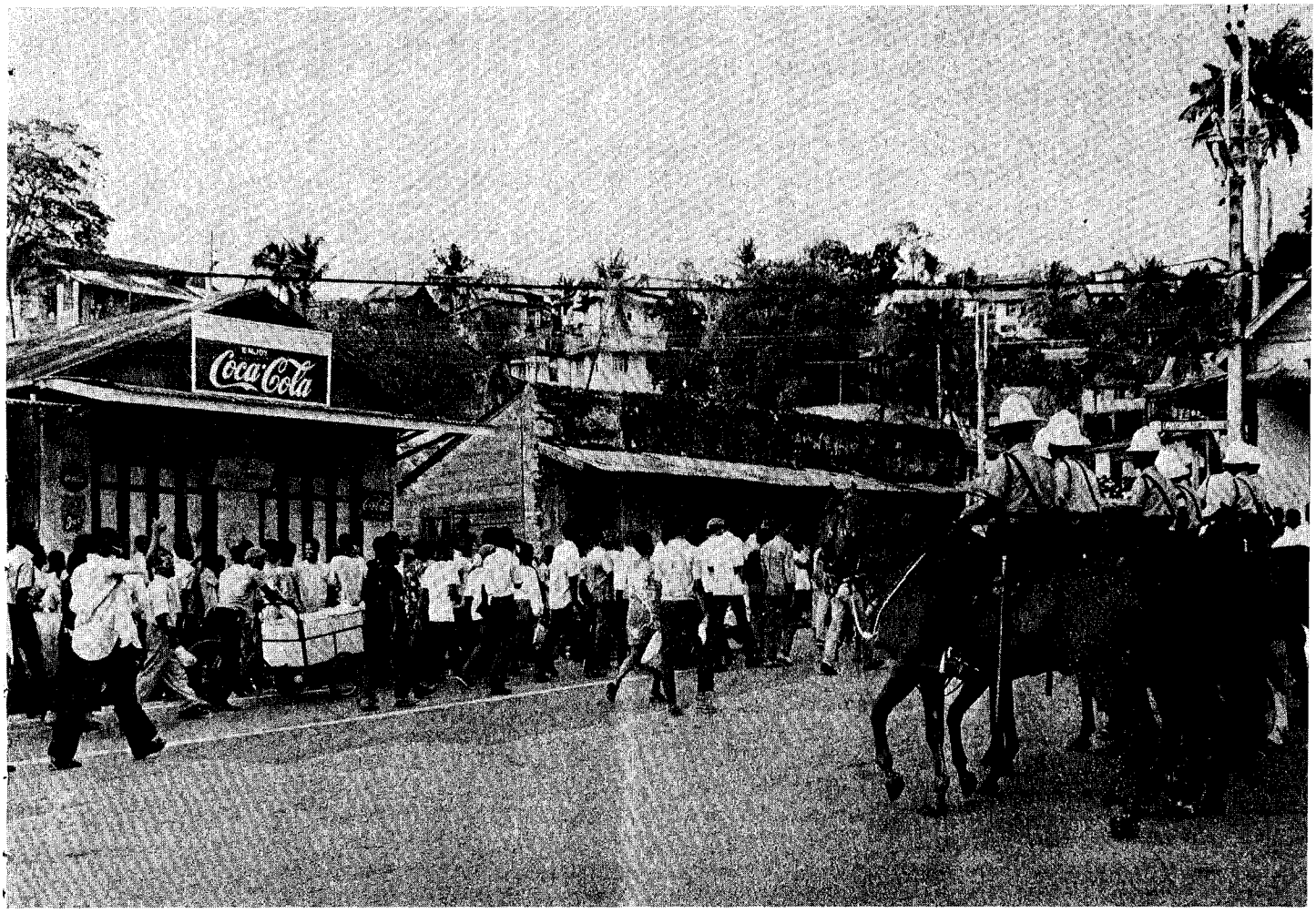
The Abeng movement in Jamaica serves as a good example since it was a direct response to the Rodney affair. A small four-page newspaper, Abeng first appeared February 1, 1969. It stopped publishing ten months later. Yet for the time it existed, Abeng represented, and gave expression to, the most radical politics Jamaica has produced. In some ways, the publication was disjointed and contradictory, but still it accomplished what no other radical organization had been able to do. It communicated with the Jamaican people.

Abeng derived its name from the horn early revolutionaries once used to call one another. The name was appropriate. The columns were used to exchange views between the people within the University and the Jamaicans who lived in the slums of Kingston or in rural villages. If an article or statement came to the editors from a small village in Manchester, the piece would be printed as it was, without editing. The language of the paper was the language of the people. And on Thursday evenings when the four-page weekly would come from the press, dozens of vendors circulated the paper by car throughout



Eusi Kwayana
ASCRIA head
in Guyana

Geddes Granger
NJAC in Trinidad



The beginnings of the"February Revolution"in Trinidad

the countryside. As the months went by, these vendors began to notice that the villagers would be standing by the roadside, waiting for their weekly supply. Often a vendor would be handed a little note with questions on it about some point made in the paper the week before. The vendors would stop and explain, then be invited to come back and speak to the people of the village at some later date.

Abeng had no "set line", however. It was composed of many different types of people with different ideological perspectives. On the masthead, for example, was a quotation from Marcus Garvey, while the newspaper's analysis of Jamaican society was a blend of Marxism, Caribbean nationalism and black nationalism adapted to the uniqueness of Caribbean conditions.

More than anything else, however, Abeng was agitational. It moved people. Abeng carried pictures of police beatings, stories about discrimination in the tourist hotels of the north shore, and in language the people could understand, analysis of the economic conditions of the country. There were features about Marcus Garvey, his thought and vision; historical articles about past Jamaican revolutionaries; and news about the black struggle in the United States and in Africa. But all the while, Abeng focused its criticism on the Jamaican Government, attacked it for corruption, inefficiency and inability to deal with the conditions oppressing the Jamaican people.

Meanwhile in Trinidad, St. Lucia, Belize and Guyana, the same type of little newspaper has appeared. Some have been less effective than others, but all have had an impact on the politics of their respective countries. In Guyana, for example, it was the Ratoon group that invited Stokely Carmichael for a visit in May 1970, a visit that has since sparked controversy within Guyana and throughout the Commonwealth Caribbean states. For Carmichael's visit, Ratoon had the support of the two major political parties, Prime Minister Forbes Burnham's People's National Congress, and Dr. Cheddi Jagan's People's Progressive Party. During his week-long stay, Carmichael's concepts about what direction the movement in the Caribbean should take provoked great controversy about tactics for revolutionary change. In Trinidad, Moko and Tapia provided some of the political activism that led to what became Trinidad's February Revolution.

The most significant show of radical power to date has been in Trinidad where, for eight weeks (February 26-April 22, 1970), a small activist organization called the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC) led a mass movement of thousands that nearly brought the first successful Black Power revolution to the Caribbean. Starting with only a nine-man demonstration on the afternoon of February 26, NJAC's leadership was able to mobilize ten thousand followers within a week, and ten times that number within six weeks.

The Army (below) and the Police (above)
Trinidad 1970

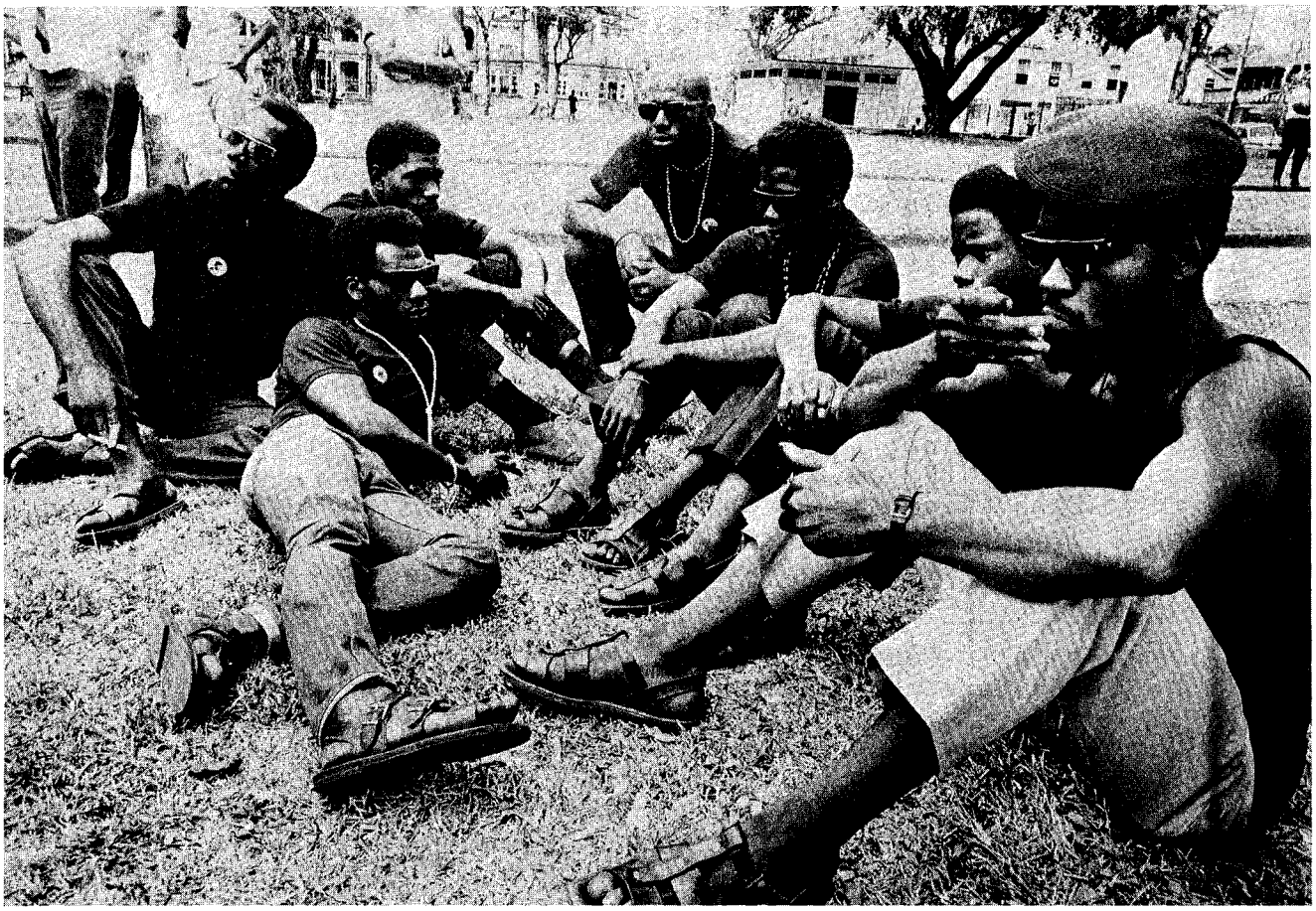
Led by Geddes Granger, a recent graduate of the University of the West Indies, NJAC called for an end to economic colonialism and attacked the white power structure that controls the Caribbean:

> Our movement is working towards the day when each black person will be able to get a fair deal, be he of African or East Indian descent, will be able to feel that he has a stake in the future of our society. We are therefore against the present system in Trinidad which can only result in the perpetuation of the status-quo. In Trinidad we have a black Government which is not working in the interest of the people, for they strive to perpetuate a system of capitalism, a system which serves to provide huge profits for the foreign firms like the Royal Bank of Canada, Alcan, or Texaco Trinidad. We cannot and indeed will not allow our black people to be durther dehumanized. And I say to you, there must be change.

For eight weeks, demonstrations numbering eight to twenty thousand Trinidadians kept the country in a perpetual state of protest. Granger with his arms uplifted pleaded with the crowds to rise up and rid Trinidad of its white oppressors. Meanwhile, the local press and government agreed that there was need for change, that the black population had been short-changed, but that violence or revolution were not the answers. Yet Granger kept marching--and with him the population. The middle-class, threatened as they have never been, began to panic and packed their bags to leave for "vacation" in Barbados--a haven for the middle-class whites of the Caribbean.

Finally, by the second week of April, the movement was ready to peak. Granger's NJAC, university students, East Indians, thousands of unemployed blacks and even labor (led by George Weekes' Oilfield Workers Trade Union) appeared to be ready to ask the Government to resign. A mass rally and general strike was called for April 22 to spearhead the movement's demands.

On the night of April 20, however, Prime Minister Williams declared a state of emergency, imposed martial law on the country and had most in prison by the next morning. In spite of the Government's action, half of Trinidad's Army rebelled as they were issued arms by their officers, seized the main arsenal and held it for four days before surrenduring to loyalist troops and police equipped with $80,000 worth of arms and ammunition provided by the United States Government.



A group of Black Panther
Party members, in
Trinidad, 1970

Meanwhile, as the tribunals and trials began in Trinidad, other Commonwealth Caribbean states have also taken action against the region's activists. The Government of Barbados has banned all Black Power spokesmen from the state and introduced a Public Order Act preventing Bajans from speaking publicly about Black Power. In Grenada, Premier Eric Gairy (one of the most repressive Caribbean leaders), has doubled the island's police force and over the radio explained that Grenada did not need Black Power as in the United States since in the Caribbean "power is already in the hands of black people." In St. Vincent, scores of names are on the island's "undesirable aliens" list, names that are associated with the movement in the Caribbean. In Belize, two Black Power advocates, members of the United Black Association for Development, are charged with seditious conspiracy after their newspaper, Amandala, published demands for an end to economic colonialism. In St. Lucia, the Forum has been prevented from going into the villages of the island to talk to the people about Black Power. In Dominica, similar actions have been taken by government, and in Jamaica, the writings of black leaders such as Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale have been confiscated. It is getting to the point, as C. L. R. James has recently said, that even the writings of Dr. Eric Williams will have to be banned in the Caribbean ".

Nevertheless, in spite of the pressure from regional governments, the Commonwealth Caribbean radicals have continued to organize. And as in the past, when different conditions required changes in tactics, so now the Caribbean militants (ranging from Marxists to Black Nationalists) recognize that present circumstances dictate new strategy. So the shift from pure analysis to mass actions, marches and demonstrations has become a foundation for the more serious work of organizing at community or village level, work that is certainly less dramatic and less obvious, but in the end far more likely to bring effective action.

In Guyana, several groups are active, including Ascria, the Ratoon Group and the Action Vanguard Workers Party. These groups are partially responsible for the actions the Guyana Government has recently taken against the foreign-controlled mining industry. As of January 1, 1971, the Government under Forbes Burnham assumed control of Alcan's bauxite operations and will soon do likewise with Reynolds Metals. Meanwhile, in Trinidad, those activists no longer in prison are continuing to organize. Tapia is still intact, concentrating on community action programs at village level. NJAC has moved into the rural areas to gather support for post-Carnival actions planned for the spring elections (Eric Williams' term expires this year). Then in the smaller states, there are also young activists--many returned from universities in North America--developing strong support for change. In St. Vincent, Grenada and St. Lucia, particularly, the continued domination of the local elites and foreign land owners will not last much longer. Those who have returned have experienced racism in North America, have actively participated in the struggles of black Americans and are determined to implement the programs implicit in the work of such groups as the New World.

Before long, these movements must begin to surface throughout the Caribbean, creating new "February Revolutions." The economic structure of the Commonwealth Caribbean, the racism intrinsic to that structure, and the inability of the current political leadership to enact the necessary changes must, in time, result in greater confrontation. In all probability, it will be violent confrontation, basically because the Black Power movement will be responding to State violence, to pressures from the police, and to the American presence. The probability is that it will be a racial confrontation as well, simply because the economic lines have been drawn that way.

Frank McDonald

Frank McDonald

Received in New York on March 4, 1971.