

The Grenada Revolution Can Teach Us About People's Power

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Global Research, October 25, 2016

[TeleSUR](#) 19 October 2016

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

The collapse of the Grenadian Revolution on 19 October 1983^[1] should be carefully examined for the lessons that it might offer to organizers in the Caribbean who are currently organizing with the labouring classes. If the working-class shall be the architect of its liberation, the process of revolution-making should enable them to fulfill that role. Fundamental change should not be the outcome of a vanguard force that usurps the initiative of the people. Self-emancipation of the people, as advocated by Walter Rodney and C. L. R. James, is the prudent and humanistic approach to struggle, if “all power to the people” is not simply an exercise in empty sloganeering.

The Grenadian Revolution of 1979-1983 was the most significant revolutionary political development or experimentation in the post-independence Anglophone Caribbean. This Caribbean revolution broke away from the inherited Westminster political governance of British imperialism and embraced the ideological path of revolutionary state socialism. The latter path was a rejection of capitalism that is associated with genocide, slavery, indentureship and continued neocolonialism in the Caribbean.

Ken Boodhoo makes this assessment of the legacy of the Grenadian Revolution: “The 1979-1983 experiment in Grenada will undoubtedly be regarded by historians as one of the major progressive mile-stones in the region’s history.”^[2] This revolution was the result of centuries of resistance to capitalist exploitation, anti-African racism, oppression of women and European domination in the Caribbean.^[3] This Grenadian Revolution was greeted with enthusiasm and solidarity within the ranks of progressive forces across the Americas.

Unfortunately, internal conflicts over political direction and organisational leadership structures and practices within the New Jewel Movement (NJM) between its two major leaders, Prime Minister Maurice and Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard, led to a palace coup and the disarming of the revolution and the people.^[4]

On 19 October 1983, the army fired on the people, executed Bishop and other leaders (Jacqueline Creft, Norris Bain, Fitzroy Bain, Unison Whiteman and Vincent Noel) and imposed a four-day round-the-clock curfew on the country. The leaders and civilians were murdered after the people released Bishop from house arrest and stormed Fort Rupert, the army’s headquarters.

The Revolutionary Military Council was declared the new sheriff in town on 20 October 1983 and the people were effectively chased away from the staging of history as its principal actors.^[5] This repressive development officially communicated to the people that power was never located in their mass organizations and workers, zonal, and parish councils, the

erstwhile grassroots democratic organs of the Grenadian Revolution. The men and women at the top of the NJM's organisational food chain, a distinct minority, were and have always been the effective rulers of revolutionary Grenada, notwithstanding the leadership's claim that it was constructing a system wherein the people are the decision-makers.[6]

The means that we use to pursue or achieve revolutionary outcomes will unavoidably shape the processes, relations, programmes and political, economic and social institutions in the emancipated society. When some revolutionaries dismiss the general operationalising of the notion "the end justifies the means" or "by any means necessary," their concerns or critiques extend beyond an action that might not be guided by a moral code of action.

These revolutionaries are preoccupied with the real fear that the means unguided by strict moral or ethical guidelines could undermine the goals and practices that are the foundation of the very society being pursued by the forces of human emancipation. With respect to the Grenadian Revolution, authoritarian means could not have given birth to the following end – the self-emancipation of the people. Effective control, initiative and power must be in the hands of the working-class in order for it to carry out the tasks associated with the development of a socialist society.

The NJM mimicked the organizational processes, structures and beliefs and spirit of the Leninist model of organising the people for revolution. It went in this direction after the failure of the series of mass protest actions of 1974 and January 1975 to overthrow the entrenched, authoritarian and repressive Eric Gairy regime, even with one mass protest that attracted 20,000 participants. The expected spontaneous uprising of the masses did not materialize and the NJM looked for other models of fomenting a successful insurrection.

After 1974, the NJM embraced the idea and practice of the Leninist vanguard party with its restrictive and exacting membership criteria, a hierarchical, commandist organisational structure and a conspiratorial, secretive ethos.[7] This approach to the exercise of power was maintained during the tenure of the People's Revolutionary Government of 1979-1983.

During the present period of struggle, it is critically important for organisers to centre self-emancipation or the people taking centre stage in the theorizing and practical actions that are executed in the movements for peace, dignity, justice, respect and socialism. The Grenadian Revolution has taught us that power-from-above as expressed through a vanguard party and an all-powerful state coupled with community-based consultative structures is not a substitute for the direct exercise of power by the working-class and other oppressed groups.

Based on the accumulated experience of the working-class with revolutionary or radical parties that have captured state power, it should be clear that the power to make the final economic, social and political decisions are usually sequestered in the hands of the politicians, party bosses and the bureaucracy. Today's organisers cannot ignore the fact that top-down decision-making structures are a fundamental character of the state. The preceding state of affairs is hostile to the possibility of the people shaping the decisions that impact their lives.

The revolutionary socialist or communist society will be a stateless one. If means are ends in a state of becoming that which is self-consciously desired or planned, the state with its hierarchy, centralist nature and power-from-above tendencies cannot serve as the

instrument for engendering socialism. Since 1917 to today, we have almost one hundred years of revolutionary history to examine the capacity of the state to engender the self-organisation of the masses. The venerable Caribbean Marxist C. L. R. James was also skeptical of the ability of the state to promote socialism with the self-management of the people over the workplace and the rest of society's critical institutions.[\[8\]](#)

The programmes, projects and institutions that emerge from the organising work of the revolutionary organizers in the Caribbean should reflect the participatory democratic or self-emancipatory principles and practices that will be found in the future socialist or communist society. The organisations and institutions of the labouring classes should be laboratories that prepare the people for the communist or anarchist society that will be classless, stateless and self-organised by the people.

Therefore, as we organise against the exploitative and alienating nature of the capitalist workplace, the revolutionary organisers and the people must embrace labour self-management as a way to get the working-class ready for a society in which capital is under the control of the workers. This self-organization or self-emancipatory philosophy, attitude and beliefs should be extended to all areas of activities in the organising that is done in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas.

The Grenadian Revolution has made it clear that the hierarchically organized and centralist vanguard party and the overwhelming power imbalance between the state and civil society will not give birth to a socialist society that is defined by the self-emancipation of the labouring classes. Imperialism's acts of aggression and destabilization cannot serve as an excuse to not actualize the self-organization of the masses.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) The violent seizure of power by a faction of the New Jewel Movement and disarming of the labouring classes provided the pretext for the invasion and destruction of the Grenadian Revolution by the United States on 25 October 1983.

[\[2\]](#) Ken I. Boodhoo, *The Grenada Revolution: Rationale for Failure and Lessons for the Caribbean* (Dialogue #61) (1986). LACC Occasional papers series. Dialogues (1980 - 1994), Paper 8: 29.

[\[3\]](#) David Hinds, "The Grenadian Revolution and the Caribbean Left: The Case of Guyana's Working People's Alliance," *Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies*, 35, 3 and 4 (2010): 76.

[\[4\]](#) Brian Meek's argue in his book *Caribbean Revolutions and Revolutionary Theory: An Assessment of Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2001 [1993]) that no sharp ideological differences existed between Bishop and Coard with respect to their commitment to Leninism and socialism. The political conflict was centred upon the role of the principal leader and the party in the process of the revolution's activities (pp. 170-74).

[\[5\]](#) Steve Clark, "The Second Assassination of Maurice Bishop," *New International: A Magazine of Marxist Politics and Theory*, no. 6 (1987): 62-63.

[\[6\]](#) Tony Martin, Ed, *In Nobody's Backyard: The Grenada Revolution in its Own Words, Volume I: The Revolution at Home*, (Dover, Massachusetts: The Majority Press, 1983), 58-61.

[\[7\]](#) Tennyson S D Joseph, "C.L.R. James' Theoretical Concerns and the Grenada Revolution: Lessons for the Future," *Journal of Eastern Caribbean Studies*, 35, 3 and (2010): 15-18; Meeks, *Caribbean*

Revolutions, 149-52.

[8] Tennyson S D Joseph, "C.L.R. James' Theoretical Concerns," 6-9.

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