

60th Anniversary of Dockworkers Strike of 1959

September 16th 1959 according to the 'Joe Mills Story' as written by Dr. Eva Hodgson "shook the very foundation of the entire white establishment's racist anti-working-class structure".

In the same book the then Governor Major-General Sir. Julian Gascoigne stated, 'demonstrations against political, social, or industrial conditions will always provide an opportunity for the more embittered or less responsible coloured agitators, to inject racial grievances in the dispute and to stir up anti-white feeling'.

According to the History of the BIU as written by the late Bro. Ira Philips, Bro. Joe paid a heavy personal price for his activism he was blackballed by employers. Bro. Joe was not a college or university trained man having left school at the age of thirteen which can be said for many Trade Unionist not having a college or university degree but could take on any employer with all the titles and degrees behind their names.

Bro. Joe started his career as a longshoreman in New York where he trained as a mechanic and joined the International Longshoremen's Association where he gained insight into the importance of collective action.

In 1952 he became President of the BIU's Longshoremen's Division, agitation on the Docks had been ongoing, the workers were demanding job security and improvement in working conditions. They were also demanding that stevedoring firms desist from treating longshoremen as casual workers, whom they picked and chose as and when they wanted, also the employer were under no obligation to pay such benefits as sick leave, insurance protection against injury or death on the docks and overtime pay on holidays.

On May 8th 1959 the Union formally laid it's demands before the stevedoring firms A.W. West and Son, Holmes Stevedoring Company, Adderley Brothers & Sons and Coralstone Shipping Company. The firms ignored the Union.

On July 13th 1959 the longshoremen went on strike, forcing ships that had arrived to return several days later to New York and Canada a similar situation could have prevailed but Assemblyman W.L. Tucker the only Black Commission agent in the country stepped in as a private mediator. The longshoremen were given a pay increase of one shilling and sixpence for 18 months and they promised to undertake reform on the dock. On September 2nd 1959 Bro. Joe issued a statement charging that the stevedores were reneging on their promises, he gave notice of a new strike which took effect on Tuesday, September 15th 1959.

The Stevedores also had a tendency to use scab labour or volunteers mainly white clerks from Hamilton stores to unload ships while gangs of longshoremen hung around the docks idle.

On Wednesday, September 16th 1959 came the violent showdown, the Riot Act of 1902 was read for the first time in Bermuda's history. The police who were armed forced the longshoremen off the docks and had volunteers unload the cargo; the situation was getting very tense until Bro. Joe could be heard shouting '*take it easy we have no weapons, we will go and get them, you want violence we don't*'. The longshoremen retreated to union headquarters but just before noon they reappeared walking by the police station, led by Bro.

Joe armed with picks, ironed bars sticks, stones and bottles carrying placards and calling for justice.

The senior magistrate stood on the balcony of the Trimmingham building and read the Riot Act, for first time in the history of Bermuda.

A final settlement of the strike was reached on October 7th 1959 with a contract to take effect for 18 months, the stevedores agreed to go through the Union to obtain gangs as opposed to 400 – 500 men showing up on a given day and only half being used.

The employers Council was formed shortly after that and they went to work dividing the membership of the union and undermining Bro. Joe. They started paying some union members more than others to gain their loyalty and launched a smear campaign about Bro. Joe's so-called lack of education and diplomacy.

According to Bro. Vincent Minors younger dockworkers had great confidence in Bro. Joe but there began the beginning of the split of the union and the formation of the Bermuda Dock Workers Union. On December 23rd 1960 the stevedores notified the BIU they would no longer do business with them. In March of 1961 President, Martin Wilson and Secretary, Mark Swan went to Government House to ask for an inquiry to be made into the conditions on the docks. BIU members joined the BDWU they felt if they could not beat them on the outside, join them and bust them open and '*hold on*' became their password.

During the BELCO Riots of 1965 the BDWU staged a sympathy strike as a mark of solidarity and came back home to the BIU, Bro. Vincent gives credit to the late Bro. Carlton Askia as the one who brought them home.

Bro. Joseph Mills was called burly, uneducated, bull-headed and a wharf-rat but he was a man with great insight and vision, the establishment knew this and that is why they relied on the divide and conquer tactic to try and diminish his importance to labour. That eventually led to the Dockworkers walking away from the Union and forming a company union and Bro. Joe being black-balled and unable to work in Bermuda for a time. Bro. Joe saw the importance of the union being affiliated with the International Longshoreman's Association and was able to gain an affiliation for the Bermuda Industrial Union.

The Bermuda Industrial Union is very grateful to Bro. Joe and those workers that stood with him in the tough times in Bermuda's Labour History, those that have gone on and those that are still with us today. Such as Bro. Vincent 'Drip' Minors who constantly reminds us of the very important role and sacrifice Bro. Joseph Mills paid in the history of the Bermuda Industrial Union. The union has listened and now when one drives into Union Gas they can see a mural that has been put on the glass, to make sure members and the public know the significance of Bro. Joseph Mills, Union Gas was his last place of employment.

On this 60th Anniversary of the Dockworkers Strike the Bermuda Industrial Union wanted to take time out and reflect and remember this most important period in our history. We thank those that have gone on like Bro. Joe and those that are still here to continue to remind us of the history not only of the Dockworkers but the history of a very racially divided Bermuda and how the Oligarch lorded their power over working class people, depriving them of making a living in Bermuda. Workers must never forget the struggle that went on to get them the benefits and the right to decent work they enjoy today.