

WE ARE NOT YET FINISHED SALUTING "THE FATHER OF LABOUR"

By: P. Anthony White

Tomorrow, the first Friday in the month of June, will be observed as Labour Day in The Bahamas. That has been the tradition since 1960 when parliament passed legislation making Labour Day a public holiday.

Ideally, the holiday for workers each year should have attached to it the name of the late Sir Randol Fawkes who, long ago, had the vision and determination, and the fighting spirit to devote practically his entire existence to the rights, the welfare, and the protection of the workers of The Bahamas.

The absolutely fascinating story of Randol Francis Fawkes, who passed away, is one teeming with passion, poetry, and an indefatigable capacity for dealing in any way necessary with the plight of the poor.

Unfortunately the diabolical Bay street, and even some of his elite black compatriots, had marked the unstoppable Randol Fawkes as a troublemaker who must not be allowed to wide a berth in which to make his trouble.

Born on Fort Fincastle, Randol Fawkes, one of the two politicians who made majority rule possible in 1967, upon achieving manhood had a remarkable resemblance to Vladimir Ilich Lenin, who led Russia's Society of the People's Commissars (Communist Party), and became president of Russia following the October 1917 revolution.

Randol Fawkes had attended Western Senior School and the old government High School in Nassau Court, where the headmaster was the irascible Englishman Mr. Woods. Randol later articulated for five years in the law chambers of the late Thaddeus Toote, and was eventually called to practice at The Bahamas Bar.

In 1954, following a most contentious court case, Randol Fawkes was suspended from the Bar for two years, and went into self exile in new York City where he worked as an iceman with the Knickerbocker Ice Company in Brooklyn, as a common labourer with the Continental Ribbon Cutting Company, and as a typist with a Wall Street magazine.

In all that he had constantly to duck and dodge from immigration authorities, as he had no permission to work in the United States. The road was rough, but he was determined to make it. Roaming the streets of Harlem, of Queens and of Brooklyn, he came face to face with the hardships of the small black man, and somehow found strength to move on.

He returned to The Bahamas in 1955, and when he did so, he had fire in his belly, determined not only to exact revenge for what Bay Street had done to him and his young family, but to play a full role in the wider people's movement for the rights. He knew he could do that most effectively by organizing and leading the labouring masses.

Two years earlier, in 1953, the Progressive Liberal Party had been established. The push was on for the 1956 general elections.

Not long after he returned home from New York, Fawkes got down to the business of Labour. In New York he had spent much time in employment agencies as he went from job to job, mostly not remaining in one place for any great length of time so that he left a trail for the vigilant immigration men.

In Nassau he opened an employment agency at the corner of Bay Street and Elizabeth Avenue. There had never before been such a facility in The Bahamas, but in short order unemployed workers came seeking whatever jobs they could find. As they came, Fawkes not only placed them where he could, but also urged employers to give them decent salaries and good working conditions.

In addition, however, as he set his Labour machine in motion, Randol Fawkes began organizing the workers who came to his agency seeking employment into craft unions, thus also becoming a bargaining agent for the workers. Of course Bay Street wasn't at all amused. The idea of collective bargaining simply did not sit well with employers.

Under the guidance of Randol Fawkes, the small unions came closer and closer together, until it came time for him to execute his master stroke – bringing them under one big umbrella – The Bahamas Federation of Labour (BFL). That was to be the major and mighty industrial organization which would deal with large industrial disputes, especially with multi-national corporations, leaving the individual member unions to handle smaller problems.

The ultimate aim of the BFL was to push for the enactment of a Fair Labour Code and the establishment of an Industrial Conciliation board. Fawkes's BFL also intended to make certain that at the end of the day, Bahamians were free to join any union and have access to job training and apprenticeship programmes, and a social security system.

With Randol Fawkes in the driver's seat, the BFL wasted no time in making its presence felt in the community, taking the workers on strike for better wages, with remarkable success as, it seemed, employers were getting the message that labour was on the move and would stand for no foolish, selfish, potentially dangerous resistance.

The union picketed the Fort Montagu Beach Hotel because the workers there were on the job for too many ours, and steamship agents were compelled to sign a Collective Bargaining Agreement with the United Brotherhood of Longshoremen. Yes, the union had become a reality and was moving on.

At one point when through hard-nosed negotiation the BFL won an extra per hour for longshoremen (stevedores), an angry but yet worried Stafford sands asked Fawkes whether it was his intention to destroy the Bahamian economy. The fearless Fawkes retorted to the fat Bay Street bully with the glass eye that such was indeed this intention. Later he explained that response to the masses thus:

"My brothers and sisters, I intend to destroy this barefooted economy and put some shoes on it! I intend to destroy this empty dinner table and pout some food on it! I intend to destroy this empty pocketbook and put some money in it! I intend to wipe the furrowed brows of the old and weary, place smiles on their faces and songs in their heart."

That was the classical thespian Randol Fawkes, who played the harmonica and wrote poetry beautifully, adding poetry, almost musical poetry, to his platform for economy change in his Bahamas, and not being afraid to declare it in the face of the embodiment of all Bay street's financial and political power.

Yet, up to that point, although he no doubt knew that in time he would be called upon by others, and by his own heart, to choose sides officially; Randol Fawkes had not declared himself politically in any way.

When he had landed in trouble and was dis-barred earlier, there were a few whom he earlier described as "some of his elite black compatriots", who had become part of the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP), and who, for whatever reason, continued to avoid Fawkes because they felt he was too brash, too much of a maverick, and too unwilling to be and ordered team player.

For quite a long time, Cyril St. John Stevenson, secretary-general of the PLP, had tried to prevail upon Randol Fawkes to join the movement as the party began the measured march to the 1956 general elections. The flamboyant Stevenson, who already had his eye on one of the Andros seats was also editor of *The Nassau Herald*, located on Lewis Street at the corner of Glinton Square.

Randol Fawkes resided at the other end of Glinton Square, at McPherson Street, and often would walk past the newspaper on his way home, often stopping in for a chat if he saw Stevenson's brown Ford parked outside. One slow newspaper day he stopped for such a chat, and Stevenson again put the question.

Others standing around were the linotype operator Stafford "Lee" Symonette, the pressman, Ira McKinney and the 15-year old white Boy (P. Anthony), Stevenson's ward and apprentice. Stevenson put that point that regardless of the view of others in the party, Fawkes was good for the movement, and that together, the two of them, Fawkes and Stevenson, could help bring home the bacon for workers and all the people.

As was his style, Fawkes no doubt went home that night and prayed about the matter, most certainly discussed the matter with his loving and beloved wife, Jacqueline, and they perhaps prayed some more.

The next day, he officially joined the PLP, and shortly thereafter he was nominated, together with the PLP's legal advisor, Lynden O. Pindling, to contest the House of Assembly seats for the Southern District of New Providence.

In early 1956, Fawkes's suspension from the Bar was lifted; he and the PLP went heavily into the campaign for the election scheduled for June and July of that year. Yet Randol Fawkes's mission on the part of the workers remained a priority in his manifesto. He wanted, from as far back as then, an organized labour day for the workers.

His selected date was meant to coincide with the Burma Road riot of 1st June 1942, when workers "declared war on the conchy joe". Workers would gather at the Windsor Park and march up to Bay Street, across from East Street, and south to the Southern Recreation Grounds for the official ceremonies.

The march was scheduled for noon, and at noon it started to rain. O, Lord, did it rain, but the workers marched to the beat of the brass bands, with photographer Stanley Toogood clicking away at each historic step of the occasion. As they marched, and as the sun burst brilliantly through the clouds, they sang the words Randol Fawkes had written to the tune of America's *Battle Hymn of the Republic*:

***"On the first day of June we stood against the foe,
And demanded Freedom Now and that tyranny must go;
For we have seen the glory that's beyond the status quo,
For we won't be slaves anymore.
SOLIDARITY FOREVER
SOLIDARITY FOREVER
SOLIDARITY FOREVER,
FOR THE UNION MAKES US STRONG"***

The marchers and singers included construction workers, hotel and domestic employees, longshoremen, garbage collectors, street sweepers – the gamut of workers who had come to know and to appreciate the might and the necessity of the union. Randol Fawkes was in his element.

Those on the platform included the Royal Governor, Lord Ranfurly, who delivered brief remarks.

Six years were to elapse before a stubborn, shortsighted Bay Street would reluctantly cause the first Friday in June each year to be observed as Labour Day and a public holiday. But it was Randol Fawkes's dream and desire for the workers of The Bahamas, and it came about largely because he, even more stubborn than Bay Street, harboured a faith that would, indeed, one day move the mountain.

Yes, Sir Randol Fawkes was the determined man who made it all happen. The nation has not yet completed its task of according him his deserving reward and recognition.

Happy Labour Day ... for what it's worth.

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