Comprehension

History of Labour Day in Trinidad and Tobago

"Enough is Enough" read one sign, " Fair work, fair pay" read another. Even as the mob closed in on the police officers, the people kept chanting! "Burn him! Burn him!" someone from the crowd shouted and burn him they did! What had led up to this moment in Fyzabad , southern Trinidad?

For many years workers throughout the country but particularly in the Oil fields had been complaining against the inequality of earnings. Worker abuse, under-payment, deplorable working conditions and racism were common place in many work environments resulting in a poor standard of living. Workers barely had enough money to buy their necessities and pay their bills and although they worked hard, they were not being paid a fair wage.

Tubal Uriah "Buzz" Butler, a Grenadian immigrant considered a 'fiery radical' was the man at the forefront leading the people's cry for change. He had given many speeches encouraging the workers to 'stand up for their rights' and for this he was arrested. On one such occasion after he was released, he was summoned on June 14th 1937 before the court. When he did not appear, police officers were sent to arrest him again. His followers resisted his arrest and bloody riots broke out on 19th June 1937 resulting in the death of nine workers and two policemen.

One officer was Corporal Charlie King who was burnt to death. Today, there stands a monument dedicated to these events in Fyzabad Trinidad at the street corner where it all happened. That area is now called "Charlie King Junction".

Butler went on the run from the authorities, giving himself up in September 1937 and he eventually spent almost two years in prison.(9 September 1937 to May 1939)Some positives which came out of the riots were the creation of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU), which became the first registered trade union in the country and an in depth investigation into the causes of the riots resulting in recommendations made to ensure that such events should never be repeated on our shores. Labour Day was declared a national holiday in Trinidad and Tobago in 1973 and is celebrated on the 19th June annually.

Tubal Uriah Buzz Butler received the nation's highest award, The Trinity Cross in 1970.(This was later changed to the Order of The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago) and a main Highway was named in his honour.

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Trinity Cross in gold

Butler statue in Fyzabad

Tubal Uriah "Buzz" Butler

Answer the questions below

1. From the passage above give two reasons why workers were dissatisfied.
2. Who was the man taking the lead in the protests?
3. Why were officers sent to arrest Butler on the 19th June 1937?
4. How did the people respond to this event?
5. Who was burnt to death during the 'Butler Riots'?
6. Do you think that Butler should have been imprisoned ? If yes , why ? If not , why not?
7. State two positives which came out of those riots:
8. How was Butler eventually acknowledged for his contributions towards improved working conditions?

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