

Responding to the Plight of Workers

Ever since 1990's, the world would have seen an onslaught upon the workforce. This comes against the pronouncements made by governments that for them, job creation and employment is a number one priority. It is understandable why this is important to any government, for it is through the collection of taxes paid by workers that the state generates revenue to finance the social programmes of health and education. Governments now face the problem of supporting the introduction of new technologies in the workplace; albeit for the purpose of promoting efficiencies and higher level of productivity, while at the same time, having to manage the fall out which comes from the reduction of in the number of persons who are employed.

While the introduction of new technologies is considered as appropriate for the times, the question can be raised about governments' awareness of the impact which this could have on the rising tide of unemployment and underemployment. With the threat being posed to job retention, job security and job sustainability, the thinking of governments seems to be a serious contradiction to the ultimate goal of sustaining employment levels. It would appear that both their thinking and actions are incompatible and inconsistent with the United Nation Sustainable Developments Goals. For starters, the number one UN Sustainable Development Goal is that of poverty alleviation. It is very unlikely with millions being forced out of work and rendered unemployed, that this will advance the noble intention to end poverty and to ensure prosperity for everyone.

Bearing in mind the global intention, it may well be the case that governments are caught in a trap of having to deal to with what is ideal against what is realty. This position is founded on the information provided by the UN, which reports that 700 million people or 10 percent of the world's population who still live in extreme poverty, are yet struggling to fulfill the most basic needs of health and education and access to water and sanitation. Considering the global impact which COVID 19 has made on economies, it is reasonable to assume that this further exacerbate the situation, and even contribute to accelerating the race to the bottom. The UN acknowledges the in the aftermath of the pandemic, the challenges which are presented are not only limited to the health crisis, but to the devastating social and economic crisis to be experienced over the months and years to come. To put this into context, the observation coming out from the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP), identifies with the fact that income losses are expected to exceed \$220 billion in developing countries and that an estimated 55 percent of the global population have no access to social protection. According to the UNDP, "These losses will reverberate across societies, impacting education, human rights, and in most severe cases, basic food security and nutrition."

This raises questions as to where this leaves the large global unemployed and underemployed workforce, and in particular, those members of the workforce in the developing countries of the world, who are expected to be more impacted than those in first world countries. The contention is that there is more room for exploitation of workers. This requires extreme vigilance on the part

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of trade unions in ensuring that the gains made by labour over the years are not eroded, and that the human rights of workers are not abused. Already there are signs that employers are moving to unilaterally slash the wages and /or salaries of workers. Others are even more ruthless by issuing threats to dismiss workers who refuse to comply with their demand to be COVID 19 immunize or subject themselves to daily or routine testing for the corona virus.

Beyond this, there is the ongoing struggle on how best to address the issue of human trafficking. In the fast-changing environment, this certainly is a cause for greater concern and warrants decisive action to be taken to address it. The hard fact is that the exploitation of labour will likely continue rise. As people compete for the few quality jobs that are available and struggle to resist facing adjunct poverty, their vulnerability opens the door for the trade to flourish. Throughout the Caribbean region, the notion of slavery is considered a relic of our past, but based on the current trends, it would appear as if there is the emergence of a new form of modern-day slavery.

The developments of late all have implications for the promotion of the Decent Work Agenda. It is for trade unions to be proactive and not reactive to the actions of employers, including government as the largest employer. The labour movement must reenergize itself and come out of its state of dormancy. Labour must be strong in its organization of workers, lobbying, advocacy and representation efforts, if it is to send a strong statement and make a fundamental difference.