

The 2020 Caribbean Labour Movement Agenda

It is known that the issues of rising unemployment, youth unemployment, the denial of workers' and human rights, human trafficking, declining union membership, declining union finances, divisiveness within the ranks of the membership and the leadership of some trade unions and the marginalization of trade unions by the actions of governments, are amongst those things impacting on the work of trade unions. While these issues are of immediate concern to labour, that of the restoration of the ailing economies stands out as the number one issue. In recent times, the introduction of restructuring programmes has been the order of the day. Full attention now has to be placed on growth if a turnaround is to be forthcoming in the immediate future.

The eventual outcomes will depend largely on government policies and programmes, considering that these have the potential to eventuate in job and wealth creation. On the other hand, with increased employment, there is the distinct likelihood that this could reduce the glaring incidence of poverty which exists at the level of the lower and middle income groups. This however remains dependent on the quality of the jobs which are provided. Where new jobs are low paying and require low skilled workers, this to all intents and purposes would only statistically reduce the unemployment figures. Ever mindful of this fact, it is imperative that trade unions must continue to be in the forefront of promoting decent work.

Trade unions have an obligation and responsibility to promote the views of the International Labour Organization (ILO) on decent work. There is the need to constantly impress on employers that they should provide opportunities for work that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development, social integration and freedom for people to express their ideas by respecting workplace democracy.

Caribbean societies are becoming far more developed than they were fifty years ago. Commensurate with this, it is to be expected that the quality of jobs and the level of wages paid would be consistent with national growth and development. With greater emphasis being applied to qualifications, skills and competencies, it is only reasonable to conclude that trade unions press their demands for the payment of decent wages and salaries. Working class people cannot be left to survive in the current high cost of living societies, where they work only to meet basic needs. It is time that trade unions across the region begin to press demands for

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governments to address basic minimum wage standards in an effort to address some of the exploitation that is occurring across some economic sectors.

At a time when trade unions embrace the introduction of new technologies in the workplace, ranging from digitalization to robotics, they face a conundrum in that there will be the displacement of workers. This undoubtedly runs at odds against their efforts of promoting new jobs to add to the existing ones. Based on the inevitability of some job losses, the emphasis must be placed on having quality and sustainable jobs which are created. In addition to this, trade unions must strongly advocate for workplace training and retraining. Provision for this ought to be included in collective bargaining agreements, and monitoring systems must be established to have oversight that the provision is kept.

From a workers' perspective, Caribbean trade unions should place the subjects of unemployment, poverty alleviation, the empowerment and engagement of workers and workplace democracy on its list of priorities to be addressed in 2020. Accepting that attached to each of these is a sense of high importance, it cannot be ignored that the labour movement remains in a helpless state if it does not pay attention to its ability to organize the very workers that trade unions seek to represent. With this being the case, trade unions must place the organizing of workers as a top priority on its 2020 agenda.

Moving further along, the labour movement needs to concern itself with the future of work in an era of global supply chains, embracing the free movement of labour under the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME). With reference to the latter, it is anticipated that the trade unions will work to ensure that labour rights are protected, and that countries across the region will establish the requisite social protection floor that will redound to the benefits of workers from fellow Caribbean states.

With the continued movement towards regional integration, it is hoped that in 2020, the regional labour organizations will live up to their promise made at the Industrial Global Union's Caribbean meeting held in Paramaribo in Suriname on 12-13 November, 2018, to strengthen their outreach and cooperation with national centres and unions and in other countries in the Caribbean region.

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