

The Realities of the Times

Where ever we are in the world, we are reminded by the Holy Scripture as recorded in **Timothy 3:1-5**, “But realize this that in the last days difficult times will come.”

Those who are faced with economic, social challenges, dislocation and deprivation would be the first to admit that the experiences are real. The trade union as a representative body of workers and a voice of civil society, understands the severity of the stressors which impact upon the lives of working-class people. How can today’s labour movement successfully respond to meet the challenges of the time which continue to occupy the attention of most?

Some would argue that the trade union movement is struggling to maintain its imagine and respect and survive. Is it correct to accuse trade unions of compromising themselves? Is this an accurate assessment or is it a misguided perception which arises from a lack of understanding on how the process of consultation, dialogue, collaboration and cooperation works.

Those who have a real concern about some ongoing developments within the local, regional and international labour movement may well identify with the lyrics of the calypso entitled ‘SIGNS’, released in the year 2010 and sung by Barbadian calypsonian ‘The Red Plastic Bag,’ The lyrics are as follows:

*‘Signs are everywhere, don’t you get mixed up, don’t you get tied up, all of the signs are there’
‘These are the signs of the times, you can see where they are pointing, you can see where they are leading, don’t be taking sixes for a nine, these are the signs of the times.’*

It is said that the calypsonian performs a dual role. The calypsonian captures and records the developments in our society and acts as a representative of the people. It would seem that Red Plastic Bag and his colleagues work to create a consciousness of the populace of what is happening within the society.

Now that all the signs point towards division within the trade union movement, is it that the membership is prepared to leave this matter unchecked? Is it that there is little concern over the inter union rivalry trade unions and in some cases, actions that seemingly contribute to the playing off of one against another? Are individual unions being encouraged to present themselves as a dominant organization, with a narrow self-serving interest? The development can potentially serve to erode the solidarity and unification which the labour movement has been built on.

The history of the Caribbean, tells us that the signs of the times tend to mirror the developments which followed the birth of the regional labour movement. The trade unionists who turned politicians, seemingly have forgotten that their intention was to promote unity of purpose. A glaring example of this is reflected in the failure of the attempt at political federation, 1958-1962. The attempt was undermined by the belief that one from ten left zero.

Today what does the labour movement have to contend with? For starters the accusation being made by the membership of the lack of or poor representation must be addressed. The promotion of individual interest, the assassination and denigration of individual trade unions and trade union leadership from within the fraternity itself must be a worrying sign. There are those who may wish to bury their heads in the sand, but the signs of the times are real.

The claim is being made that respect for traditional practices such as the non-poaching of membership, is now a thing of a past. The taking of legal action by one trade union against each other, the resorting of employees of a trade union to taking strike action against their employer because of bad management practices, and the calling of vote of no confidence in a union leader are all disconcerting matters.

The public disclosure to the press of what happens in a Board and/or closed doors meeting, be it a union general conference or a special meeting is reprehensible. It ought to be a matter of concern that annual general conferences are constantly aborted because of a lack of a quorum. These developments are doing little to attract persons to offer themselves for election to the office in the trade union leadership. The world watches in awe as it witnesses the public denigration of individual trade union leaders by fellow trade union leaders. Many are left in shock when trade unions are led in a public march by employers. Aren't these developments not indicative of the signs of the time?

It is apparent that all signs are pointing to the fact that the trade unions are fast losing the respect which they have earned. Those employers and managers who declare that they have no time for unions must be highly optimistic that the demise of the labour movement is imminent. As for the politicians they must be gloating in the fact that they have the trade unions just where they wanted them to be. Putting this scenario in the context of a boxing match, it would appear that trade unions are on the ropes and struggling to defend themselves. Those who are pessimistic must be reminded that trade unions may appear to be cornered but rest assured, labour is neither down nor out.