

The Value of Trade Unions

There has been much debate of the status of trade unions. Some would argue that they are on the decline, while others would prefer to refer to it as just a transitory phase. Whatever is the view, it lends to the raising of the burning question as to whether this experience is temporary or a long-lasting phase. The answer will hardly lie in any speculation, but rather in what is the response of the trade union leadership to the current state of affairs. The movement needs to come up with a plan to rescue the labour movement from what seems to be a perilous situation.

The answer to this lies primarily in what the people want. The trade union is about the service to the people. If the people opt to move themselves away and turn their back on the institution which has been their saviour in the promotion and protection of workers' rights, then there can be no doubt that the writing is on the wall. For those who believe that this is in the offering and is likely to occur, it should be clear to them that the labour movement was born out of the struggles of working class people, and though seemingly under pressure, it continues to survive and play its role in protecting, representing, defending and promoting the interest of working class people. It is a fact that the struggles of working-class people have not become extinct and will not go away. As a matter of fact, these struggles continue to emerge on a daily basis.

It ought not to be difficult to see how the capitalist class has continued to manipulate working class people; developed policies that are directed at subjecting working class people to conditions of work that restrict their power based. The global trend has always been that the working class are exploited to give cheap labour. Despite the fact that we have moved on from the dark days of slavery, the trade union remains the watch dog to reduce the incidence of new forms of modern slavery being part of the contemporary culture. The exploitation of child labour, human trafficking and the like are matters that concern the labour movement. The labour movement continues to fight the capitalist class and the political directorate in some instance, to address the matter of a national minimum wage, so that those who are deemed as the most vulnerable, could be elevated from the realms of adjunct poverty.

Those of us who pay attention to global developments would be aware of the actions of repressive governments to trade union leaders and trade union

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activities. The reason for this is that organized labour is seen as a threat. This alone should serve to provide sound reasoning as to why those at the top would want to divide and scatter those at the lower levels of society. This ought to drive working-class people ought to recognize that combination of solidarity and unity of purpose, is fundamental to the development of the collective will.

There can be no disputing that the labour movement remains in the forefront of the battle to champion the cause of labour. The work of the labour movement in Barbados is known for pressing for progressive labour legislation is well known. There has been the introduction to the Employment Rights Act, the Occupational Safety and Health at Work Act, the Sexual Harassment Act and amendments to the Shop Acts. At the level of the International Labour Organization, trade unions are at the centre of developing labour standards and policies.

The role of the local trade unions must always be directed at organizing, protecting workers' rights, improving working conditions, and working to empowering and driving the engagement of workers. The work of trade unions in promoting the Decent Work Agenda, stands as a testimony that it continues to carry out its mandate. The work extends to the promotion of the social protection floor, for the purpose of ensuring that workers are entitled to a range of social security benefits. Currently, through the collective bargaining agreement, labour unions are working to establish paternity leave for men, much in the same way maternity is offered to female workers who give birth to children.

Should there be any doubt about the value of Trade unions, then clarity may be found in the definition which suggests that 'they are organizations of workers which seek through collective bargaining with employers to protect and improve the real incomes of their members. They provide or improve job security, protect workers against unfair dismissal and other issues relating to employment legislation.'