

Emancipate the Workforce

The date of 1 August, 1938 has been historically recorded as Emancipation Day. On this date, the institution of slavery was legally ended. This meant that a period characterized by the enslavement of Africans who were captured and sold to sugar cane plantations owners in the Caribbean colonies was finally halted. With this development, it ended the triangular slave trade, which had a routing of outbound from England to the west coast of Africa, then onward to the West Indies and return journey to England. The significance of the annual commemoration of this day, is connected to the emancipation or freedom of the slaves who formed the workforce and were the bedrock of Caribbean societies.

It is of historical significance to note that on August 1, 1985, Trinidad and Tobago became the first independent country of the world to declare a national holiday to commemorate the abolition of slavery. It is ironic that a Caribbean nation would have led the world in celebrating the achievement against the struggle for freedom of the individual against forced labour.

Slavery was a state which existed in the Caribbean since the 16th century. When it was abolished, the road to freedom was not easy, as the planter class remained opposed to emancipation. As a compromise, the Colonial Office in Britain made an award of 20,000,000 pounds to the planters as compensation for the loss of their properties. Accepting the fact that since emancipation has long been achieved, some would nonetheless argue that we continue to live in societies that are constraining. This point of view is made on the premise that there is a sense of a dominant and controlling influence being exercised over the workforce by the business class. It is considered that in practice, emancipation was meant to push back against the abuse of human rights and the denying of civil rights and liberties. On the other hand, there is a school of thought that despite the gains made over the years, the struggle continues against workplace injustices, inequalities, discrimination and exploitation of the workers.

With the attainment of political independence by many Caribbean states, emancipation has had a new meaning, whereby the citizens are now freed from the various political restrictions which had been previously imposed on them. An example of this is the treatment meted out as equal citizens of the state. A change

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has been brought about with the franchise or right to vote being an entitlement of every eligible citizen. Along with this, the establishment of the trade union movement in the Caribbean in the post 1930's, has made a significant impact in transforming the life of workers.

Trade unions have and continue to play a significant role in lobbying for social, economic and political changes. Moreover, they have been tirelessly working to protect the rights and interests of working-class people. Trade unions shoulder an awesome responsibility in working to bring more autonomy, self-efficacy and creativity to people's working lives, through increasing both job satisfaction and productivity. With these intentions, the emancipation process remains a work in progress, which must be driven by the constant education of the workforce. It is imperative that the enlightenment of the workforce remains at the forefront of the struggle for change. Emancipation must be seen as a principal factor that drives the engines of change in any progressive society.

One of the scars of the colonial period which has been evident in Caribbean societies and in the south of the United States of America where slavery was embedded, is reflected in the legacy of social degeneration and deprivation. This state has been perpetuated by a merchant or business class, which by its actions, has been working to preserve the capitalist system and class stratification which have long existed. There seems to be no escape from the capitalist system. As it stands, there has simply been a transfer from the plantation system which was characterized by forced labour, to new forms and systems of work where there is control by the business class, based on sheer economic power. The bottom-line is that there is still the exploitation of labour. There is generally access to a high level of low quality and low paying jobs.

It cannot be denied that emancipation came as a consequence of the struggles of slave rebellions and lobbying undertaken by British anti-slavery enthusiasts called abolitionists. As we reflect on the world in which we live today, it would seem that the struggle for emancipation is ongoing. The Black Lives Matters campaign is a living testimony to this. For what is known, it has been launched to address injustices in the system, which are specifically targeted against people of colour.

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