

Looking Ahead

History will record that the birth of the labour movement had its genius in the industrial revolution which started in Britain in the early 19th Century. The development of the movement in the English speaking Caribbean was propelled by the prevailing social and economic issues at the time. The irony of this was that there existed solidarity amongst the then advocates for change, which forced the colonial powers to address the concerns of the people.

Today Caribbean people have the good fortune to celebrate the positive outcomes of the early struggles which included the granting of adult suffrage, freedom of association with the right to organize under the umbrella of the trade union, the emergence of free and democratic societies and the right for persons of colour to serve in the parliament of the land as the representative voice of the masses. These achievements are significant in the history of the development of the region and should not be taken for granted.

Today, trade unions across the region have every reason to consolidate and build on what have been achieved. These achievements shouldn't and can't be taken for granted. The organizing of labour, establishing of collective bargaining units at workplaces and an emphasis on collective bargaining and negotiations, must remain at the forefront of the agenda of all trade unions. With the growing concern in the decline of union membership, trade unions now have to redouble their efforts if they are not to lose ground as far as their impact can be felt in providing representation for employees in the workplace, so as to ensure that gains which were achieved with respect to conditions of service are not eroded.

The views are being promulgated in some quarters that the trade union movement is under threat, and/or is being marginalized. How conceivable is the threat? Is it a matter of conjecture or speculation, or is it perceived or real? There are several changes in the employment relationship which have some serious implications for the collective bargaining unit. Chief among these is the move towards offering individual contracts to prospective employees. This is a genuine concern which warrants an immediate response from the labour movement.

This is a case where collective action and the touted trade union solidarity needs to have meaning more so than convenient reiterate. If trade unions hold the view that there is concern about the attractiveness of trade unions to young workers, then this suggests that there is a need to do something about it. Fundamental to bringing about

a change would be the education of young workers. More importantly, unions have to find more exciting ways of selling themselves and attracting young workers.

What can the unions do to attract young workers? A good starting point would be for unions to have a presence in secondary schools and tertiary institutions in educating and call the attention of prospective grandaunts to the benefits of being unionized. Rather than mouthing off about being marginalized, unions in these times ought to concern themselves with building and promoting a positive image of themselves if they are to be taken seriously by the old and young members of the workforce.

Considering the meaning of marginalization, which is 'to keep someone in powerless or unimportant position within a society', such a thought should not be entertained or voiced by trade union leaders. As the saying goes, we ought to be careful what we ask for.