

The Vibrancy of Caribbean Trade Unions

It has been established that Caribbean trade unions came into being in the 1920's. The transition from the colonial era to that of independence period in the 1960's, brought with it heightened vibrancy of the labour movement in the English-speaking Caribbean island states. At the turn of the 21st Century, it would seem that this momentum has tended to wane. What accounts for this is most likely a million-dollar question, the answer for which can only be deeply rooted in speculation. The early history of the regional labour movement would suggest that the heightened interest in its advocacy had much to do with the struggles for political independence and social advancement. It was recognized that social advancement formed the basis for economic enfranchisement and the promotion of individual rights and freedoms.

The push for the formation of Caribbean trade unions was grounded in the need to encourage workers to become organized. It became important for workers to unite and to strengthen these organizations as the representative voice of labour. This laid the platform for trade unions to work alongside the emerging political parties, whose common agenda was to agitate for the economic, social advancement and political enfranchisement of working-class people. One interesting feature of this period was the association which leaders of trade unions shared with political parties of time.

The strength of the trade union movement back then appeared to have resided in its ability to organize and mobilize workers. The ability to attract, organize and mobilize workers is apparently a fundamental problem which faces Caribbean trade unions in this the first quarter of the 21st century. This assumption is based on reports of declining trade union membership. Claims are made that with the advent of globalization, periods of economic recessions, restructuring programmes implemented in both the public and private sectors, the introduction of new technologies including digitization and the COVID 19 Pandemic, are reasons which have contributed to the decline in the level of unionization.

In the absence of any recent statistical data to give an accurate sense of the level unionization across the region is, it can only be speculated that there has been an overall decline in trade union membership. However, research findings suggest that there is a decline in trade union membership across the Caribbean region, "In May 1998 the Caribbean Group for Cooperation in Economic Development (CGCED) published a document prepared for the International American Development Bank on Workers and Labour Markets in the Caribbean. According to their report, union density in 1996 in Caribbean members of the CGCED was as follows: Country %Labour Force: Unionized Antigua & Barbuda 20 –28, Bahamas 25, Barbados 20, Belize 11, Dominica 10, Grenada 20 – 25, Guyana 34, Jamaica 15 –25, St Kitts-Nevis 33, St Lucia 20, St Vincent & The Grenadines 10, Suriname 60, Trinidad & Tobago 20 – 28." (*Trade Union Administration A Caribbean Workers' Education Guide Robert L. Morris, ILO 2002*)

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Coming out of his research on Labour Market Regulation and Employment in the Caribbean in 2001, Dr. Andrew Downes commented that unionization in the region appeared to be low. It is difficult to understand why this would be case at a time when working class people are more conscious of advancing their causes which evolve around the promotion and protection of their rights and safeguarding their interest. This is disconcerting when it is considered that working class people are genuinely concerned about the need to address issues such as poverty alleviation, a living and decent wage, social security protection, improved working conditions, workplace safety and health, decent work, workplace standards and the democratization of the workplace. It would seem to be senseless that workers would opt not to be part of a trade union which is undertaking to represent their collective interest.

Today's trade union leaders might wish to quiz themselves as to what is contributing to the lack of insightful and purposeful thinking by workers. Experts have argued that the lack of trade union education could be a factor which is contributing to the limited and active participation of the trade union membership. This shouldn't be taken lightly, as it appears that there has been a de-emphasis on trade union education and training; with more attention being paid to matters related to the financing of trade unions.

The organizing and mobilizing of workers seem not to be strategic and hence this has been a demotivating factor amongst the membership. The vibrancy of trade unions is seemingly derailed by the competition which they engage among themselves. They compete in the recruitment of membership, and instead of cooperating, there is a rancor and division. This provides Government with the opportunity to engage in divisive tactics, which served to undermine the solidarity and vibrancy of trade unions. This seems to be loss upon some trade union leaders, who for various reasons, take to promoting agendas that don't win the support of sections of the membership. This basically contributes to the undermining of the objective of promoting solidarity and unification.

The issue of vibrancy is certainly called into question when trade unions cannot obtain a quorum for their annual general meeting or conference, whether it is held face to face or on-line. This development conveys the message that trade unions stand a better chance of mobilizing their membership in times of wages and salaries negotiations, or for convenient purposes.

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