

The Significance of the Observance of Labour Day

The observance of International Workers' Day, commonly referred to as Labour Day or May Day, is for the multipurpose of reflection on the historical struggles of workers, achievements recorded, and as an expression of workers' solidarity. Moreover, the celebration of Labour Day is to highlight and recognize the role of workers in the building of society, and to keep workers' rights at the forefront of the public agenda.

It is extremely important that the labour movement highlights the gains which were fought for and won. In Barbados, such things include a forty-hour work week, an eight-hour workday, minimum wage, sick leave, vacation leave, maternity leave, maternity leave and study leave. In recent times, paternity leave and the payment of an unemployment benefit have come on stream.

Additionally, workers have benefitted from the introduction of new and progressive labour legislation, such as the Safety and Health at Work Act 2012, the Employment Rights Act 2012, the Employment (Prevention of Discrimination) Act 2020, the Sexual Harassment (Prevention) Act 2017-21, the Family Leave Bill 2025. Apart from the legislation, there has also been the introduction of the Employment Rights Tribunal which was established in the year 2013. This is a specialized tripartite arbitration body that settles employment disputes, particularly unfair dismissals. The ERT allows for the settlement of matters outside of the traditional court system. The beauty about the workings of the ERT is that it functions under the voluntaristic system of the industrial relations practice.

The ratification of the core Convention of the International Labour Organization (ILO) by the Government of Barbados, is to be highlighted. The ten fundamental (core) ILO Conventions ratified as of June 2025, are the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87), the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No.98), C155 – Occupational Safety and Health Convention,

1981 (No. 155), ratified on June 5, 2025 during the 113th International Labour Conference, and the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187).

With the coming into effect of the Caribbean Community (Free Movement of Nationals) Bill, 2025, Barbadian labour can enjoy labour mobility across CARICOM. This is an important development which is worth celebrating, given the history that Labour Day celebrations on 1 May, that grew from the Caribbean Labour movement of the 1930's and 1940's. At that time, the movement celebrated the contribution of workers to national development. It now serves as a reminder that the many rights now enjoyed, and which are sometimes taken for granted, came through the struggles and agitation of early organized labour.

The global changing labour market dynamics and the challenges to the industrial relations practice, demand that new tactics are employed. Organizing younger workers is a must. This must be followed by the engaging of the young workers. Trade unions and the labour movement at large, must be prepared to deal with the issues of declining membership density, trade union recognition, outsourcing and contract employment, automation, artificial intelligence (AI), the emergence of the gig economy, social issues such as mental health and political push back on trade unions, including the engagement of the practice of collective bargaining.

