

*Against all odds: Highlighting the Resilience of the Trade Union**Movement*

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Recently, the Caribbean trade union movement has been scrutinized as being incapable of contending with the escalating challenges experienced by the regional labour force. Among the most controversial of these criticisms is the view that trade unions



are moving towards the 'end of history' meaning that its function has become obsolete to the advancement of the labour environment.

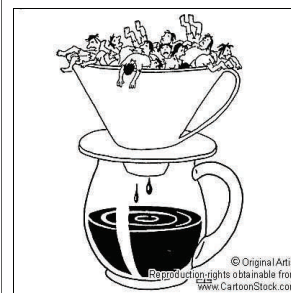
Sceptics of the movement have presented various arguments not only to discredit the relevance of trade unions to the modern labour movement, but also to expel its viability in facilitating social and economic development in the region.

As it relates to the Caribbean it is evident that the status of trade unions in the labour movement has been impeded by regional and international forces imposing their personal agendas on the regional labour movement. Critics of the modern trade union movement have provided crucial arguments to support their supposition which by equitable means will be critically explored in this discourse. It is the reservation of many that trade union movement is collapsing due to a series of internal and external problems, which have served to exacerbate the challenges faced by the Caribbean trade union movement.

Internally, it is believed that the movement itself is dying because it is suffering from a perennial problem of aging leadership. Evidently, most trade unions in the Caribbean do not have a recruiting machinery to garner the involvement of young people.

The average age within the executive bodies of the Caribbean Public Service Association and the Caribbean Congress of Labour is 55. This culture within trade unions may serve to stifle the development of trade unions due to the absence of youthful exuberance and inventiveness.

Apart from this, it is proclaimed that the gender structure of trade unions is not gender equitable because it serves to protect male hegemony within the movement. As such, it is believed that trade unions are not attuned with the global changes that have been made to facilitate women in the development paradigm. A joint study by representatives of Associations of Women's Organisations in Jamaica entitled 'Gender and Governance: Implications for Women's Participation on Boards and Commissions in Jamaica,' revealed that the Senior Management position of unions in Jamaica are almost exclusively male dominated. This trend is further observed throughout most trade unions existing in the Caribbean.



Externally, the current challenges that have been imposed upon the Caribbean trade union movement have also emerged through the further deepening of the globalization process. Evidently, trade unions are becoming increasingly defenceless to the unanimous power of multi-national corporations (MNCs) that have infiltrated the region in search of prospective markets and labour resources. Despite their necessity in providing employment, there have been reports of numerous cases where

MNCs have violated the Decent Work protocols of the Caribbean in an attempt to attain cheap labour. This infringement has put various

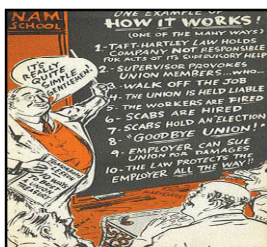
MNCs in direct conflict with the mandate of regional trade unions that exists to protect worker rights and freedom.

Essentially, it should be noted that these organizations have been able to erode the powers of trade unions by influencing government policy and reshaping labour standards in the region due to their financial clout and economic prestige.



In conjunction to this, the influence of regional trade unions is also encroached upon by the prospects of regional integration under the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME). The CSME, in spite its necessity to regional development may inadvertently disempower Caribbean trade unions in several ways. The provisions implemented to facilitate free movement of labour throughout the Caribbean have posed several challenges to the status of trade union membership. The increased mobilization of labour under the CSME has made it difficult for trade unions to recruit and consolidate membership due to the increased migration of trade union members.

Similarly, the recent negotiation of an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between CARIFORUM and the European Union may have trade unions grappling with unprecedented challenges that cannot be addressed by quintessential methods. As such critics believe that by implement-



ing the EPA protocols, regional trade unions will be further curtailed by the ambition and policies of primate organizations originating all the way from Europe.

In the Caribbean it is noticeable where the trade union movement have established labour colleges and training centres to provide education for workers and other members of the tri-partite community. In the Caribbean there are

6 labour organizations which serve educate workers in various academic disciplines that are relevant to their personal and professional development. The necessity of labour education has proven to be vital in providing academic qualifications for workers and pre-conditioning them to meet the demands of a global marketplace.

Trade unions are also taking lead roles in promoting sustainable development for workers and for the environment. Throughout the Caribbean trade unions have become highly vocalised in promoting the 'Decent Work' mandate within all institutions to ensure that workers are exposed to appropriate work standards. In conjunction to this, trade unions have also recognized the necessity to advocate environmental



awareness in order to protect workers and their community. The signing of the 'Johannesburg Declaration' by African labour unions serves to introduce a new facet to trade unionism which recognises the importance of environmental preservation to the well being of workers.

The persistence of child labour within the contemporary era has mobilized trade unions to call upon governments to fight for the elimination of child labour throughout the world. Recently, the ITUC launched an action guide focusing on the prevention of child labour by providing campaigning tools and direct support to trade unions to fight against child labour. As such, trade unions have essentially embraced certain humanitarian concepts which are directed towards protecting not only workers but also the environment and the lives of victimised children.

Overviewing the history of the trade unions will reveal that the fundamental principles upon which the movement is rooted has made it very resilient in order to confront challenges threatening the existence of the labour movement. Therefore, to disclaim the relevance of trade unions in the modern era is a misappropriation of the value trade unions have to the holistic development of society. The recent challenges experienced by the global labour movement have ultimately spawned new dimensions in trade unions and their social responsibilities.

Therefore, the modern trade union movement today has assimilated a multi-faceted framework which ultimately serves to protect the labour movement and preserve the social environment. The perception that trade unions is no longer relevant cannot be substantiated by pessimistic and parochial discourses. What is apparent is that the trade union

spite the adversities encountered is evolving in response to the continuous restructuring and reshaping of the global work environment.

The recently held ILO-CCL Round Table for Caribbean Workers' Organizations "Globalization, Regional Integration and the Economic Partnership Agreement: The Social and Labour Dimensions".

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Caribbean Congress of Labour (CCL) round table discussions was held between June 23-25 2008. The sponsors for the event were Bureau of Standards Workers Activities, Geneva and Switzerland Sub-regional Office for the Caribbean and the Caribbean Congress of Labour. The countries represented at the discussion were Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St Vincent an the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago. The non-metropolitan territories present were Anguilla, Aruba, Bermuda and Curacao Netherland Antilles.

The purpose of the discussions was to sensitize trade unionists throughout the region about the implications EPA may have on the labour movement and worker rights throughout the Caribbean. Importantly, the round table also served to ascertain recommendations from participants which could be channelled through the CCL to regional governments involved in the EPA negotiations.

The round table had a total of thirteen presenters who departed information relating to the procedures and protocols of EPA agreement. Among the presenters were Professor Norman Girvan of the University of the West Indies, Mr. Henry Gill,

Senior Director of the Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery (CRNM) and Ms. Clair Courtielle, Policy Officer, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

Notice

- The Open Campus of the University of the West Indies is scheduled for commencement on August 1, 2008. The specialized units apart of this group/entity are The Hugh Lawson Shearer Trade Union Education Institute (HLSTUEI), The Caribbean Child Development Council (CCDC), Social Welfare Training Centre, Women and Development Unit (WAND)