



CIPRIANI COLLEGE OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

Beyond the Picket Line

Several local institutions have for some time been reporting a trend of declining trade union density in Trinidad and Tobago, and indeed, this trend is mirrored regionally. The ILO in a 2021 report identified that with the exception of a few Latin American countries and some countries on the African continent, the decline was consistent across the globe. This decline is undeniable, and has many commentators and the anti-union cheerleaders proclaiming the end of trade unionism. I have no intention of arguing a case against such a notion. In fact, it is a view which I share. Where I differ with the popular opinion is in the rationale.

Workplace organisation has run its course and will not survive if there is no demonstration of agility and innovation by the leadership. The ILO suggests that this situation is due to *“the shift from manufacturing to service jobs, the outsourcing of unionized jobs, the informalisation of the economy and the changing employment relationship, and automation.”* I want to suggest that our local unions have been a victim of their early successes and have lost their moorings.

Belgrave, in “Dare to Struggle”, posits a similarity between “[the] wave of revolt of such scope and intensity [that it] threatened to engulf the British West Indies in 1832” and “the political reality created by the (...) mass movement of the 1930s.” Both of these were in response to the failure of the authorities to address the fundamental condition of the mass of the population. More instructively to reinforce my point, there were no trade unions at that time.

Between the period 1838 and 1840 the Combination Ordinance became law in every British Caribbean territory, effectively preventing the formerly enslaved from forming trade union organisations. When the right to union representation was finally conceded it would come as a recommendation from the Forster Commission, a royal commission into the 1837 labour riots in Trinidad and Tobago. It stated that:

Such a movement [towards establishing Constitutional Trade Unions] given sympathetic guidance by Government and a tolerant encouragement on the part of employers during the transitional stage of its development, is the surest means of securing industrial stability and the removal of extremist tendencies (Johnson 271).

Former AG Karl Hudson Phillips tells us as late as 1938, the industrial disputes on any large scale were indistinguishable from political agitation, the settlement of which was treated by the Government as riot, insurrection and rebellion; and ruthlessly dealt with as such. Differences over conditions of employment were mainly indistinguishable from dissatisfaction with the whole system.

These two scenarios paint a clear picture. The trade union movement was born of the activities in the streets and the commitment to address fundamental condition of the mass of the population. Representation of workers where they work and not where they live is a

limited interpretation of the role of the Caribbean Trade Union, and as such, would limit its reach and appeal making decline almost inevitable.

Labour activism which was on the streets prior to the 1930s was coerced into the work place and into a relationship of inherent unequal power. Professor Elizabeth Anderson argues “that public discourse pretends that the constitution of workplace government is somehow the object of voluntary negotiation between workers and employers. This is true only for a tiny proportion of privileged workers. The vast majority are subject to private, authoritarian government, not through their own choice, but through laws that have handed nearly all authority to their employers.”

This is not a new perspective. In fact, the Moyne Commission in its report, made a similar analysis of the power relations between employer and employee where it stated that “The owner of an estate (who) employs 5000 people is in an infinitely stronger position than is any one of those employees when a question arises which includes negotiations between them over conditions of work. “

The apparent fixation on collective bargaining and improving terms and conditions of work in and of itself is not a sustainable model for worker organisation or representation. While there is no argument against the existence of labour market forces or how they impact the workplace, there is a strong case to be made that the employer has lost no ground in the last 80 odd years. Even as unions have become more proficient at industrial relations, and workers have many tangible gains at the work place, membership continues to decline.

The power in the street is metaphorical. James is speaking to the masses not to the subset or organised labour. It is therefore not the where, but the who. Who else is on the street when the union takes it business there? The unions must return to the streets to meet their allies, unionised or not, informal or formal, employed or unemployed. This was the alliance that birthed them and indeed this is the alliance which will ensure their survival.

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