



**CIPRIANI COLLEGE**  
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

# WORK MATTERS

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**COLUMN**

# Protecting Workers in an Age of Discontent

The World Economic Forum has claimed that it was the first to designate the present environment as the Fourth Industrial Revolution; this label was not only meant to capture the vicissitudes incurred by the digital revolution occurring since the middle of the twentieth century, but also phenomena characterized by a fusion of technologies blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres. In 2019, as part of the observation of its centenary, the International Labour Organization released a Declaration on the Future of work. The ILO has noted that “the world of work is experiencing transformative change, driven by technological innovations, demographic shifts, climate change and globalization”. How do we protect the interests of workers in the context of globalisation?

There are at least three publications of which I am aware that carry the title Globalisation and its Discontents with a focus on workers and their disaffection with the international economic system. That sense of discontent and almost despair was confirmed in an international survey conducted by the International Trade Union Confederation in 2017. The top line findings of that survey of more than 15,000 respondents from fifteen countries suggested that there was widespread anxiety among workers who felt that the system was generally unfair, and that globalization was failing working people.

This anxiety was based on the sense that the richest one percent’s disproportionate influence on governments (71%) was a threat to democracy and that governments were not responding adequately to the current challenges, including climate change. There was also evidence of concern that there was a job crisis in that there just were not enough jobs (half of respondents), that working standards were being dismantled (63%), family incomes were in crisis with people just getting by (80%), workers’ income had fallen behind the cost of living in the previous two years (45%), some workers (9%) lacked the money for basic necessities; and minimum wage was insufficient to get by (80%). These discontents and anxieties are the result of a trend of growing func-

tional and personal income inequality that are the corollary of the trickle-down economics ‘growth should be in the driver’s seat and distribution in the backseat’ (ILO). The small, open countries of the Caribbean are particularly vulnerable to the mal-effects of globalisation and what passes as free trade, which is really a form of protectionism designed to keep power distribution in the international economy in place. Yet these small island states are not only vulnerable to structural implications of globalisation, but they are also especially vulnerable to the impact of other manmade disruptions as well as naturally occurring ones. These are expected to multiply because of climate change. We are aware that: Climate change touches everything, is a driver of disaster risk, is a threat multiplier, exacerbates existing problems, amplifies existing social and economic disparities, is a threat to human wellbeing and health of the planet; and most importantly, the Caribbean is particularly sensitive to the effects of climate change.

We know that marginalized groups within Caribbean society already face social, economic, and political vulnerabilities and the impact of climate change will disproportionately affect them and worsen their circumstances. With regard to the world of work, we recognise that workers face specific threats as a result of climate change, including loss of employment, increased risk to health, safety, and wellness, compromise of rights and standards at work, and negative impacts in the world of work have implications for family and community harm. The Caribbean Development Bank has summed up the impact of the convergences of these structural issues and the manifestation of the vulnerabilities in the region as rising debt levels, the erosion of fiscal space, and widening policy and project implementation deficits that create a suboptimal environment for private sector-led growth.

The question arises whether the present IR system in the country, and indeed in the region is adequate for these new realities in the Caribbean work. The IR system was designed when work was mainly organised within fixed hours (including shifts, as appropriate)

and normally at a fixed location. Since then, work arrangements have become increasingly flexible and the use of information, communication and other forms of technology have become mainstream in the system. There are growing forms of atypical employment. The manifestations of these changes can be summarized as follows: changes in the education and training requirements; the use of technology, including artificial intelligence; flexible work organization, including flexitime and work from home; part-time work for multiple employees, other forms of atypical employment; and new approaches to productivity improvement.

Naturally, workers are apprehensive. Will the government systems protect the rights of workers, which are found in national law and international law and standards? Will employers seek to increasingly maximise their advantages? Are the thinking, the style of leadership, the processes for mobilisation and the way of doing business of trade unions and their leadership appropriate to the needs of workers? Such queries reside within the mind of the risk informed worker. On the other hand, for those workers who operate within informal economies, the group who is most susceptible to vulnerabilities and often bereft of social protection networks, who will articulate their needs? Their imperilled status demands a voice and recognition also. Their agency deserves equal recognition as their counterparts in the formal economies.

We will explore these issues in the coming weeks.

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