



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



# WORK MATTERS

**COLUMN**

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# Labour Day 2023, Its significance for Working People in Trinidad and Tobago

On Monday June 19th, 2023 we shall observe and celebrate the 86th anniversary of the birth of the modern Trade Union Movement in Trinidad and Tobago. The theme for Labour Day 2023 is “People’s Power, People Matter”. The theme signals a call to the government to put the average citizen of Trinidad and Tobago first and not just a select few.

There will be the iconic march from Avocat Junction to Charlie King Junction in Fyzabad followed by workers and the citizenry being addressed by the leaders of the Joint Trade Union Movement (JTUM) and the National Trade Union Centre (NATUC) on current issues affecting Labour. This would include the need for updated Labour Legislation, urgent among them being the timeliness of the recognition process for Unions to be granted certification for new groups of workers. The proliferation of contract work continues to be a burning issue and no doubt negotiations in the public and state sector will be in the spotlight.

On that Labour Day, Unions will recall the struggle against our colonial masters, sub-standard wages, mass retrenchment, high unemployment, rampant inflation, abject poverty, abuse by white managers, unbearable rents for barrack houses, and deplorable living conditions to name a few. The challenge to this deplorable state forever changed the course of our history and provided workers then with a new hope not only for a better quality of life but also for an end to British rule and a free and independent Trinidad and Tobago.

The history needs to be told of the nationwide strike on June 19th 1937 which began in the oil belt and which was led by Chief Servant, Tubal Uriah “Buzz” Butler, achieved many victories for all of the working class: Trade unions were legalised and protected Peaceful picketing was also legalised Workmen’s Compensation was also introduced Relief work for the unemployed was provided A Labour Welfare Fund was established to provide housing for sugar workers

Most importantly, universal suffrage was finally introduced and gave all citizens the right to vote which was introduced in 1946

Eighty-six years later in 2023 Trade Unions have unquestionably defended the rights of workers, improved their standard of living and their terms and conditions of employment. Today some quarters question the relevance of Trade Unions in a so called modern society. The truth is others may observe is that there is a national and global push back to roll back some of the hard won benefits that workers now enjoy and many take for granted (such as the eight hour work day). Trade Unions are called to be a voice not just for Labour but against any form of social injustice and are seen often as the moral conscience of the poor, the unemployed and the marginalised in whatever form.

Some may limit or only see the role of Trade Unions in wage negotiations but many individuals can testify that a Trade Union came to their assistance in their darkest hour after being unjustly fired, retrenched, became a victim of sexual harassment in the workplace or was simply denied a term and condition of employment or suffered an injury in the workplace. Some women have lost their job after becoming pregnant and the employer has ignored the provisions of the Maternity Protection Act. Other terms or benefits Unions have negotiated for their members and so enabled their families to live a better quality of life include the following: the 40 hour work week, paid vacation leave, sick leave, funeral leave, casual leave, maternity leave, paternity leave, study leave, overtime pay. Further there are pension plans, group medical plans, Employee Home Ownership Plans, Profit Sharing Plans and Savings Plans.

Trade Unions also advocated for the Occupational, Safety and Health Act, improvements in the Minimum Wages Act, NIS Benefits and a standard retirement age of 60.

Today Trade Unions are faced with many new challenges in the work place which they must

address. These include but not limited to:

Digitalisation, AI and Robotics in the workplace

- The disappearance of many traditional jobs
- A proliferation of contract work replacing permanent work
- Remote work or Teleworking and its implications for standard work arrangements
- Sexual orientation provisions in the work place
- An increase in migrant workers as conflicts escalate around the globe
- Climate change and its effects in the work place
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This is the first Labour Day in three years without the COVID-19 Pandemic being an inhibiting factor and the Labour Movement has signalled its return to streets of Trinidad and Tobago in defence of workers rights.

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