



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

**STATEMENT ON THE CELEBRATION OF
LABOUR DAY IN TRINIDAD
& TOBAGO - JUNE 19TH, 2026**

WORK MATTERS

COLUMN

JUNE 2026

Statement on the Celebration of Labour Day in Trinidad and Tobago - June 19th, 2026

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On Labour Day, we stand in unbroken solidarity with the working people of Trinidad and Tobago. As we pause to remember the events of 1937, we honour the men and women who, against odds that most workers today could barely fathom, dared to organize, resist, and demand dignity.

To truly appreciate what was achieved, we must first remember what was endured. In 1937, Trinidad and Tobago was a colony where worker oppression was not merely policy—it was the very foundation of the economy. Oilfield workers toiled in dangerous conditions for wages that could not sustain a family, often forced to buy goods at inflated prices from company shops that kept them in cycles of debt.

Agricultural labourers on sugar and cocoa estates faced arbitrary dismissal, physical abuse by overseers, and wages deliberately suppressed to ensure a steady supply of cheap labour. Dockworkers at the Port of Spain wharves loaded and unloaded the wealth of the nation while earning mere pennies, with no recourse when injury or sickness left them destitute. The unemployed were treated as a disposable surplus, left to wander without support or recognition. For the majority of workers, there were no contracts, no protections, no voice, and any attempt to speak was met with state violence, intimidation, and the full weight of colonial authority.

Yet out of this brutality rose something extraordinary. The 1937 uprising succeeded not because of a single leader or a single strike, but because of radical inclusion. The organizers understood something fundamental: the idea of labour was far bigger than the hewing of wood and the drawing of water. Labour was the oilfield worker, but also the unemployed youth wandering the

streets of Port of Spain, also the domestic servant, the market vendor, the stevedore, the cane-cutter. They recognised that a society built on the exploitation of labour was a system of subjugation that affected all, and so all must be involved in its dismantling. Many who were not directly oppressed in the oilfields or on the estates nonetheless joined the ranks in solidarity, marching in defence of the barefoot man, because they understood a truth that still holds today: the plight of labour was the plight of the nation.

This is the inheritance we celebrate. Not merely a calendar commemoration, but a living mandate.

Yet as we remember, we must also reckon with the present. Around the world, the trade union movement faces a gathering storm. Decades of neoliberal policy have gutted collective bargaining power. Right-to-work laws, contracting-out, and the deliberate fragmentation of workplaces have made traditional organizing harder than at any point in the post-war era. In too many countries, union density has fallen to historic lows, and with it, the political power of working people has diminished. Corporations have mastered the art of dodging responsibility reclassifying employees as “independent contractors,” hiding workers behind layers of subcontractors, and wielding technology not to liberate but to surveil, control, and discard.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the rise of the informal economy and the gig worker. The delivery rider on a scooter in Port of Spain, the domestic worker paid in cash without national insurance, the freelance graphic designer juggling platforms, the construction day-labourer waiting on a corner for a contractor, these are the faces of modern labour, and they exist largely outside the structures that the union movement built for a different era. The transformation of work demands a transformation of purpose. If unions are to remain relevant, they must stop asking workers to

fit into old categories and instead build new models of representation, new forms of mutual aid, and new strategies of collective action that reach the worker who has no fixed employer, no payslip, and no shop floor.

This is not an optional expansion. It is an existential necessity. It is all workers which must be mobilized, or all workers will be immobilized. The informal worker is not peripheral to the labour movement; they are its future. The gig worker is not an exception to be managed; they are the new center of gravity. The unemployed and underemployed are not outside the working class; they are its most vulnerable flank, and when they are left behind, the entire structure weakens.

So on this Labour Day, let our statement be clear: We remember 1937 not as a distant event, but as a reminder of what is possible when working people recognize their common cause. We commit to a labour movement that is as broad, as bold, and as inclusive as the challenge demands. And we declare, with one voice, that no worker is disposable, no work is invisible, and no economy built on exploitation will stand unopposed.

Solidarity forever.