

Reflecting on Caribbean Labour Force

The transition from a slave society where the right of choice is unheard of to living in a free and political independent nation, is a massive change to be experienced, when one reflects on the fact that slavery was based on overt exploitation. Times have changes to the point that today's employee now has the right to chose the type of work in which to engage. Moreover, the individual also has the right to choose his employer. This is a remarkable turnaround from what existed from the mid-16th Century. It is a significant achievement when it comes to identifying with the fundamental rights and freedoms that the individual now enjoys as promoted by the United Nations Human Rights Charter.

This Charter was approved by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948. It provides for the right to life, to freedom from torture, to freedom from enslavement or servitude, to protection from imprisonment for debt, to freedom from retroactive penal laws, to recognition as a person before the law, and to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Some would refer to period of slavery and the colonial period, as catastrophic time in the lives of man. Most would tend to reflect on the sad tales of the slavery experience, which primarily involved the capture, sale and bondage of negro slaves from West Africa. It is to be remembered that the Caribbean region was also the geographical location where indentured servants from England, India and China were engaged as labour by the colonial masters. The fact is that the indentured servants were not engaged as slaves, and so were afforded certain freedoms and privileges. For the purpose of making the distinction between an indentured servant and a slave, indentured servitude is described as a form of labour in which a person is contracted to work without salary for a specific number of years. The contract, called an "indenture", may be entered "voluntarily" for purported eventual compensation or debt repayment, or it may be imposed as a judicial punishment. It is noteworthy that the key words in the definition are 'contract' and 'voluntarily.'

History tells us that the first indentured labourers to the Caribbean region, came from Northern India. Others later arrived from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, the Central Provinces, Punjab and the North West Frontiers. The first Chinese migrants as indentured labourers, arrived in 1854. These worked in Dutch colonies. The historical evidence points to the fact the contract employment would have had its roots at the time of indentureship. It is said that many white immigrants arrived in colonial America as indentured servants. These young men and women who came from Britain or Germany, were under an arrangement whereby their fathers would sign legal papers, and work out an arrangement with a ship captain, who would not charge the father any money.

**Reflecting on Caribbean Labour Force: Dennis de Peiza, Labour & Employee Relations Consultant
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What is a historical fact, is that slaves were who were trafficked and enslaved from Africa to the Caribbean and in the Americas by Europeans, worked alongside white European indentured servants. The British are credited for the introduction of the indentured labour system in the region in 1843. This system took the form of debt bonds, by which 3.5 million Indians were transported to various British colonies around the world to provide labour on British plantations.

Unlike the institution of slavery, indentured servants enjoyed what was an agreement between two parties about long-term work. This could range from a specified number of years or until the servant reached a certain age. The voluntary nature of this agreement is reflected in the fact that some people indentured themselves in order to gain passage to America or to escape debt and poverty. There was also introduction of the apprenticeship scheme. Under this scheme, young people would have been bound out to a master as an apprentice to learn a trade from him. The master would feed, clothe and instruct the apprentice in the trade, and the apprentice would provide labour and watch out for his master's interests. At the end of his apprenticeship, the young person received clothes, tools, and became a journeyman who could work for himself.

In today's discussion on work, it is almost certain that the issues of women, gender and child labour will be included. The issues of equality of treatment and that of exploitation are sure to inform the discussion. Looking back to the period of slavery and indentureship, it goes without question that these matters were ignored. All that mattered to the colonial masters was that of having access to cheap and abundant labour. The rights of workers were therefore unheard of. The subsequent efforts of persons such as William Wilberforce, who championed the abolition of the slave trade, are to be applauded; if only for calling attention to those who were being treated inhumanely, exploited, and unjustly so.

As the journey continues in promoting the interest of workers, the fight against inequalities and exploitation seems to be far from over. It is known that workers continued to be undervalued, under paid, offered poor conditions of work, and are exposed to sub-standard and poor quality jobs. This would suggest that the trade unions are compelled in paying attention to the promotion of the Decent Work agenda.