

The Importance of Labour

During the colonial period, Caribbean societies flourished as a consequence of their access to slave labour. The triangular slave trade which was developed, involved the capture and sale of human beings from the African continent. These were in turn sold into slavery in the Caribbean and the Americas to work on the sugar cane plantations. The African slave trade was an economic activity that aimed to use labour for the purpose of exploiting the resources of the region, and for the purpose of providing raw materials for the manufacturing industries in European countries.

The highlight of the operations of slavery was its emphasis on the acquisition of cheap labour and the exploitation of labour. Moving on from the post-colonial period to the point where independent nation states now predominate across the English speaking Caribbean, some may argue that while the state of slavery is now denounced under national constitutions, the exploitation of workers nonetheless remains somewhat evident.

One of the core conventions of the International Organization Convention (ILO) is that of Convention No. 105, Abolition of Forced Labour. This convention gives levels of freedoms which workers were once not entitled to enjoy. In accordance with Article 1, Each Member of the International Labour Organization which ratifies this Convention undertakes to suppress and not to make use of any form of forced or compulsory labour (a) as a means of political coercion or education or as a punishment for holding or expressing political views or views ideologically opposed to the established political, social or economic system; (b) as a method of mobilizing and using labour for purposes of economic development; (c) as a means of labour discipline; (d) as a punishment for having participated in strikes; (e) as a means of racial, social, national or religious discrimination.

Employers including Government as the largest employer, would be the first to acknowledge that without labour, no industry or sector can progress. Labour is considered as critical to improving of the economy. With this acknowledgement, it would be expected that labour would be treated fairly with workers receiving better wages and salaries for work done. Moreover, the provision of profit sharing should become a part of the thinking of employers, rather than that of just retaining profits all for themselves. Monetary and other forms of inducement cannot be ruled out. These ought to be part of the thinking that places a value on labour and labour productivity. There ought to be an understanding that this wave of progressive thinking is necessary, if an injection is to be infused into the creation of new industries, the creation of attractive job opportunities and improvements in employment rates.

Much has been made of a decent and living wage. Whilst independence has brought with it several freedoms, the matter of a decent and living wage remains subject to several variables and national policy determinants. The failure of governments to offer any meaningful increase to workers in the public sector, will not stimulate and motivate workers to be more productive. The private sector has long recognized that its survival depends on its ability to be competitive. Whereas governments are more about providing services, they cannot ignore the fact that there are avenues for revenue generation and collection available to them; which can in fact strengthen their financial position.

In any conversation on the importance of labour, one would expect that the subject of remuneration, benefits and conditions of service would have a place. The importance attached to labour may be determined by the category in which an individual or group of individual employees fall. Employers may tend to focus on whether an employee is skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled. Irrespective of the category, employers should never lose sight of the fact that without workers, there would be no production of goods and services and the earning of profits.