

Putting Meaning to 'We Gatherin' 2020

We Gatherin' is an initiative which is described as a 12-month global celebration of Barbadian excellence and a recommitment to this country's successful future and core values that have defined us as a people. What meaning does this initiative has for the local labour movement and how can local trade unions relate to it? The answer to this question may be derived from the commentary of the Hon. Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, at the official launch of the We Gatherin' initiative in February, 2019. She was quoted as having said:

“It is easy for us, irrespective of political affiliation, to define the character of a nation and the character of a people. A people who understand that with a history such as what we had, you have to fight against injustice, you have to fight for fairness. In the history that we had, you have as a small country to understand that principles matter, that you have to respect the saying friends of all, satellites of none, and that that is who we are. And that may better cause others to appreciate why we don't always take the easy road, or we don't always make decisions that appear to be easy. That sometimes we pay the price for principle, but principles only mean something when it is inconvenient to stand by them. And then we understand that democracy is a precious gift. And like a house, it can only stay with us if we nurture it and we protect it.”

Coming out of the Prime Minister's commentary, there are points which resonate with the work and journey of the trade union movement. To begin with, the idea of having a gathering, suggests that there is the coming together for the purpose of uniting. It is known that this was the driving force behind the establishment and consolidation of the trade union movement. It is common knowledge that the labour movement has and continues to be in the business of fighting against injustices and working to ensure that fairness is applies. On the subject of principles, trade unions are known to uphold the values of solidarity, equality, freedom, peace and sustainability. They defend the fundamental democratic and social rights of all, irrespective of gender, race, social standing or religious persuasion.

The Hon. Prime Minister has, in articulating the full meaning and purpose of the 'We Gatherin' in 2020 in Barbados made the comment that: “2020 is our time. and I ask you to recognize that as we gather, yes, it is about us, but it is also about us speaking to the rest of the world. For Barbados must be that global hub. Barbados must be that place that has a global voice. Barbados must be that place from which global business can be transacted,

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because however small we are, however much we stand between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, we count and we matter.”

Coming out of this statement, trade unions are left to ask themselves the burning soul-searching question as to what the local labour movement can showcase to the world. It would be expected and anticipated that the answer would be a united Barbadian labour movement. Unfortunately at this time, this is an ideal that apparently seems to escape the movement. For some time now, there has been a fracture with the national trade union centre, and with no imminent healing seen in sight, it would be nothing short of hypocritical to suggest to the world that there is a common labour voice in Barbados.

At the centre of the 1991 economic and fiscal crisis which led to the formation of the then Coalitions of Trade Unions and Staff Associations of Barbados, was the catalyst of a ‘We Gatherin’ which is now a legendary moment in the history of Barbados. Not only did trade unions and staff associations gathered and unite, but labour and the private sectors shared a common bond in an effort to save the parity of the Barbados dollar to that of the United States dollar. The entire thrust was to save the devaluation of the Barbados dollars and to negate a host of austerity measures to be imposed by the Inter American Monetary Fund (IMF). In what became known as the ‘Save the nation campaign’, the labour movement showed leadership in accepting the government of the day unilateral imposition of the now historic eight percent salary cut of public sector workers.

The then ‘We Gatherin’ was born out of a crisis. It was the catalyst for the meeting of the minds, where government, labour and the private sector leadership sought to work together to solve the nation’s economic and fiscal problems. Following on this development, the Social Partnership has since been formed. It has continued to serve a useful purpose in the governance of Barbados, albeit its intention of unity of purpose has come under the microscope with the fracture of the local labour movement. If the ‘We Gatherin’ initiative is to have real meaning to the world in promoting the Barbados Social Partnership Model as the ideal which the world ought to follow, then there must be a commitment to resolving the issue of divide, so as to restore unity and consolidation of the Barbados labour movement. Since a house divided cannot stand, it would seem that government and the private sector has a role to play in ensuring that a healing comes about, if for no other reason but to showcase to the world that there is an excellent working Social Partnership Model, which all countries should consider adopting.

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