

## **A Recommitment to Social Dialogue**

The protest march by four labour unions in Barbados, namely the Barbados Workers' Union, National Union of Public Workers, Barbados Secondary Teachers' Union and the Barbados Union of Teachers, in association with the Barbados Private Sector Association (BPSA) in Bridgetown on Monday, July 24, 2017, to denounce an increase in the National Social Responsibility Levy by the government of Barbados, can be best described as an unprecedented event in the history of the country's labour relations.

Based on the colonial past of the English Speaking Caribbean, it is almost unimaginable that employers would join with labour in any form of protest action. What makes it more interesting is the way it was done. It was uncharacteristic to have paid media advertisements sponsored by members of the corporate community which supported the protest action and encouraged employees to participate in it. It is unthinkable that businesses would have committed to paying their employees their daily wage, and moreover to provide them with special T-shirts for the occasion.

As the adage goes, 'Wonders never cease to happen'. Those who were a part of the struggles of the 1930's across the Caribbean, must have turned over in their greaves when the news reached them that not only were workers being paid to protest, but some enjoyed the luxury of having the day off from work as their place of business closed its doors for the day.

It is interesting that many prominent Barbadians would have sat and observed this development, but have chosen to refrain from commenting on it. It is amazing that some of these persons would yet be quick to condemn a trade union which takes a decision to stand up for its members whose pay has been docked for exercising their right to call attention to an issue of concern or a violation of their conditions of employment.

On the other side of the coin is not unusual or uncommon for employers and even some members of the public to question the right and wisdom of a union to call a strike, or have its members take some form of protest action. This represents a serious departure from the promotion of fairness, equal rights and justice.

Those who have a narrow political or other interest are not afraid to let their voices conveniently heard, and moreover, are usually quick to castigate and chastise union leaders who take a stance that is not seemingly in their

interest. Is it questionable whether the current relationship between the private sector and the labour would continue to exist if the trade unions were to address the ongoing layoffs in that sector, by instituting forms of protest actions?

In reflecting on the historic protest march, the record would reveal that the protest was against a 400 percent increase in the National Social Responsibility Levy (NSRL) which was introduced in the Budgetary Proposals by the Hon. Christopher Sinckler, Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs, in his presentation to Parliament in July 2017. He had at the time made a quantum increase in the levy from 2% to 10%. It is hard to accept that any reasonable and right thinking person would not be concerned over this drastic measure. However, what it is required is an understanding of the nature and extent of the problem facing the country and what may be required to address it.

Given that trade unions have a responsibility to represent their members, they ought not to be condemned for doing so. However some serious questions may be raised as to why labour would want to join with capital to fight a cause, when they both hold different interests. It is best that unions are in a position to justify their positions, to properly market them to their members, and to win the membership support, so as to avoid the possibility of creating internal divide, loss of membership and public confidence.

Given the context of the state of island's economy, the jury continues to be out on whether the protest action was justified or unwarranted. The fact that there is a huge fiscal deficit, declining foreign reserves and a demand being placed on the Central Bank of Barbados to print money, it seems at odds that the model social partnership of Barbados which has been promoted across the world as the mechanism for good governance and finding workable solutions to the island's problems, could be in a position of being at odds with itself.

It begs the question as to why this is so. Some may wish to speculate and rightly so, on whether it was a matter of promoting self-interest, promoting a partisan political agenda, or simply naive thinking and/or irresponsible behaviour?

It is fair to say that the populace and the corporate community have been over taxed. It is fair to state that despite this, the average citizen is required to carry the burden of paying the Value Added Tax (VAT) on transactions at the point of sale. Unlike their counterparts in the private sector, Public Officers have not had a wages and salaries increase in nine years, but are

yet required to meet the mandatory impositions of the VAT and NSRL. On the positive side, the payment of VAT and the NSRL translate into increase revenue for government. With the slow or non-payment of VAT to government, this contributes to the inability of government to pay increases in Public Sector wages and salaries.

Against the backdrop of this, it seems passing strange that some trade unions and the private sector would have placed before the public that their resort to the streets, was to make a demand for urgent dialogue. Some may argue that the energies of participating trade unions were misdirected, based on the assumption that capital was able to engaged labour, which is under pressure from layoffs, declining membership and a membership that is demanding wages and salaries increases, to help its cause in derailing the efforts of government to get upfront payment of taxes from the business community.

A case can readily be made for labour to reassess its own cause. Rather than fight against itself and fall victim to any convenient alliance with capital. With repeated calls for social dialogue as the reason given for the protest march, it is timely to remind the Social Partners that under Protocol 6, they have commitment themselves to a formal structure to govern their continued collaboration and consultation on fundamental issues affecting their individual and collective contributions to all aspects of national development.

**DENNIS DE PEIZA**

**Labour Management Consultant**

**Regional Management Services Inc.**

**Visit our Website:** [www.regionalmanagementservicesinc](http://www.regionalmanagementservicesinc)

**Send your comments to:** [rmsinc@caribsurf.com](mailto:rmsinc@caribsurf.com)