



**Introductory Comments of Dennis dePeiza, General Secretary,
Congress of Trade Unions and Staff Associations of Barbados,
to the
Panel Discussion hosted by the West Indies Group of
University Teachers (WIGUT),
on the topic,
'Wither Trade Unionism in the 21st Century Caribbean'.**

21st November, 2013,



First let me thank the West Indies Group of University Teachers (WIGUT) for inviting me to participate in this evening's panel discussion. Appropriately, I wish to greet my fellow panelists, and of course, you the members of the audience.

It is interesting that WIGUT should have chosen this topic. To my mind its appropriateness is underscored by the many in-depth challenges and issues facing the regional labour movement; some of which have their genesis in a set of new global phenomena.

Beyond the many broad based global issues, the regional movement now has to respond to the challenge of maintaining its status quo. Trade unions are challenged to address the issues of their relevancy, to redefining their role, function and purpose, to finding new strategies to attract and sustain membership, to identify visionary leadership and to deal with the problem of succession planning.

At the regional level the movement has to treat to the issue of the harmonization of labour laws, and moreover, with securing a voice at the level of CARICOM, so that it can adequately vent the views of labour as part of the regional governance machinery.

Based on my analysis of the context in which this evening's forum is placed, it becomes apparent that this exercise is more than an academic or intellectual discussion.

I sincerely hope that the thinking which has informed WIGUT's selection of this topic, did not emerge from a perception that the trade union movement is dying,

but rather from an understanding that the movement is going through a phase of transition and transformation.

In addressing the topic under discussion, I posit that unification and solidarity are principal elements that must characterize the Caribbean trade union movement in this 21st Century. There is simply no room for grandstanding. In this rapid changing global, political, economic, social and industrial relations environment, the labour movement has to demonstrate a united front, if it is to safeguard itself against threats to its stability. It also has to position itself to be able to offer more than kneejerk responses to emerging national and global issues.

On the subject of unification and solidarity, I believe it is appropriate for me to use this occasion to make the overture to the leadership of WIGUT, to give active consideration to becoming an affiliate of the CTUSAB. There is room for you at the table.

The topic of *'Wither Trade Unionism in the 21st Century Caribbean,'* begs the question as to the effectiveness and relevancy of regional trade unions operating as individual units with perceived autonomy; and as power brokers who wield immense power and influence.

The topic lends to deeper analysis, for it commands us to look at the changing role and function of trade unions that is dictated by the developments on the global stage. These developments drive the need for a redefining of the role of trade unions. Whereas the traditional role of trade unions of organizing and representing are fundamental, trade unions must see themselves as change agents, and so can no longer have a self-imposed limit to playing a lobbying and activist role.

Paramount to the repositioning of the trade union movement so as to enable it to be more effective and to play a more decisive role, it requires that trade union leaders develop a greater understanding and appreciation for developing a system of industrial relations that is built on establishing partnerships and alliances, and the use of the mechanism known as social dialogue. It is therefore envisaged that this would lend to the consolidation of trade unions under national centres and the embracing of the social partnership mechanism.

The Caribbean in this 21st century is forced to wrestle with the changes and challenges brought on by globalization. It has to respond to the fact that union

values, justice and social cohesion are all under threat. The movement is now forced to address the issue of its weakening power which has been aided by the widening use of contract labour, and the actions of multinational corporations that are directed at repressing both employee and trade union rights.

Going forward, it is anticipated that the response of Caribbean trade unions will be driven by its vibrancy and not militancy. Its viability will depend on the solidarity that exists within its ranks, a motivated and energized membership, and by its ability to attract leaders that are visionaries and creative thinkers.

It is expected that the changing face of Caribbean trade unionism will be characterized by the transition and transform processes which have become necessary, if the region is to meet the challenges of the changing industrial relations landscape, the working environment, and labour and employment practices. In addition to these, there remain the social, political and economic challenges of the times.

In summary, there is a need to revisit how trade unions do business. This will require a change to existing policies, practices and approaches. It definitely requires an urgent review of the trade union agenda. A renewed approach has to be adapted to union organizing so as to arrest the issue of declining union density. In addition to this, other priority areas to be addressed include the development of partnerships and alliances, improvement of effective communication through the engaging of social dialogue, the education of the membership of trade unions, and strengthening the bargaining power of trade unions.

In an effort to better place regional trade unions to deliver the services expected of them, then the issue of the professionalization of trade unions has to be given serious consideration. With the increasing demands that are placed on trade unions, it is required that they move from a state of voluntarism, to one which engages voluntary and paid professional services. In addition to this, the time might now be right for having trained persons who will assume leadership roles within trade unions.

Finally, it is imperative that trade unions work to establish their financial independence. Trade unions must remove their dependence on support funding from government. As an alternative, trade unions may be called upon to consider the introduction of agency shops as the preferred option.

Moving beyond this, trade unions should direct their attention to playing a greater role in the economic life of the country, and so should give active consideration to becoming more involved in business initiatives.

These are some of my initial thoughts, which are intended to ignite the ensuing discussion and question and answer sessions that follow.

END