

**Feature Address delivered to the 41st Annual Conference
of the Barbados Union of Teachers
By Dennis de Peiza, General Secretary,
Congress of Trade Unions and Staff Associations of Barbados
At Almond Bay Conference Centre, Hastings, Christ Church
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I am heartened to have been invited by the Executive Board of the Barbados Union of Teachers (BUT), to deliver this evening's feature address at the start of this union's 41st Annual General Conference.

When Bro. Herbert Gittens, General Secretary, contacted me by telephone about my participation in this evening's Opening of the Conference, he didn't ask me if I would accept, but simply told me he was calling to inform me of the decision of the Executive Board to invite me to deliver the feature address. According to him, I didn't have an option but to accept, as he assured the Executive Committee that I wouldn't decline the offer as long as I was on island.

Let me remind Bro. Gittens that under the Decent Work Agenda, the employee has the right to freely choose work. Notwithstanding that, Bro. Gittens, I wish to assure you that to turn down this invitation was not an option for me.

Mr. President, Let me at the outset offer my thanks to you and the members of your Executive Committee for giving me this stage to share my thoughts and views on the theme of this year's Conference: '40 Years of Service and Solidarity: Progress Through Empowerment.'

As a stalwart of this organization, I consider that I am suitably placed to share my perspective on the theme; and so I will proceed by chronicling some aspects of the history of this proud organization. It is ironic that I entered the teaching profession in January, 1974, the year in which BUT was registered as an independent trade union. On joining the staff of the Parkinson Memorial School, I was quickly recruited into the fold of the BUT by our first President, the late John Cumberbatch. I make bold to state I like many others were being enrolled into the membership of an organization that was poised

for radical changes to the education and social landscape. For the purpose of the younger generation of teachers in the audience, the BUT was born in an era of perceived radicalism, which was characterized by the advocacy of the 'Black Power Movement.'

The struggle for the empowerment of teachers, along with the pressing of demands for the upward social mobility of teachers, created a platform for a new wave of trade union solidarity; that at that time was not the norm.

The championing of the trade union solidarity BUT enjoyed between 1974 and the start of the 1990's, was lead by a group of young teachers familiarly known as the 'young brigade'. It included individuals such as Carl Hall, Harry Husbands, Sydwin Bayne, Peter Alleyne, Hartley Alleyne, Noel Manning, Cobin Hinds, Cecil Payne, Richard Aimes, Barbara Brathwaite, Steven Blanchard, William Skinner and Hallam Clarke, and the late Michael Scantlebury, just to name a few. These young energetic persons were embraced and empowered by seniors such as Marjorie Marshall, Odessa Parris, Odelia Regis, Edwina Armstrong, Alfred Trotman, Stanley Mayers and Carl Springer, in forging a new path for the BUT.

The work of a vibrant and energized shop stewards body led in the early days by individuals such as the late Michael Scantlebury and Steven Blanchard, created an unprecedented level of trade union solidarity amongst the BUT membership. Those of us without hair or graying hair, would vividly recall the large number of teachers who faithfully responded to the union's call, resulting in the headquarters at Merryhill, Bethel Church Auditorium and/or the Steel Shed in Queen's Park, all bursting at the seams.

BUT as a revolutionary body set out on a mission to educate and empower teachers. As a consequence of galvanizing trade union solidarity, the governments of the day and the Ministry of Education, did not to take the BUT for granted.

This evening I wish to remind teachers that trade union solidarity must remain a key element in the future life of the BUT. I urge that you recognize and appreciate that solidarity cannot and shouldn't be limited only to times of crisis.

Mr. Master of Ceremonies, I can vividly recall that the last time I addressed this Annual Conference was some seventeen years ago. It was on the occasion of the Opening of the 24th Annual Conference of this organization, at the Barbados Hilton Hotel on Tuesday, April 7, 1998; when I delivered the President's Address. Having been afforded this opportunity this evening, I could think of no better approach to the theme of this year's Conference, but to direct my attention to reviewing where we in the BUT came from, where we are now, and where we intend to go.

Let me hasten to caution that what I say here this evening may be deemed as provocative for some. However, I urge you not to shoot the messenger but to hear the message. I am who I am. If it is one lesson I have learnt from my association with the BUT which has helped to shape me, it is that of standing up and speaking out.

Today, the Barbados Union of Teachers remains the largest of the registered teacher trade unions and staff associations on the island. It is a founding member of the Congress of Trade Union and Staff Associations of Barbados (CTUSAB), and extends its affiliation at the regional level to the Caribbean Union of Teachers and the Caribbean Congress of Labour. Internationally, it has affiliation to Education International. This constitutes a progressive move on the part of the leadership of BUT, as it has served to express the solidarity of this professional and trade union body with the varying apex bodies. This development has gone further, in that it has given BUT a voice at the higher levels and has led to many of its servants being elected to prominent positions at the regional and international levels.

It can be surmised that since being registered as a trade union in 1974, the BUT as both a representative and professional body for teachers in Barbados, has emerged as one of the new finds of an independent Barbados. As the union celebrates its forty-first year of existence as an independent body, it is to be commended and congratulated on its growth, development and achievements.

Having emerged as a member of the Civil Service Association, now the National Union of Public Workers, the BUT has through the years, benefitted from inspired leadership; starting with its first President, the late John Cumberbatch.

It was the inspiration, leadership and vision of John Cumberbatch which lead to the birth of the Outlook Magazine. His charismatic and dynamic leadership contributed to the emergence of a strong and vibrant BUT.

The achievement of forty-one years of existence and success for the BUT, speaks volumes to the strident nature of the organization, which has remained committed to its primary objectives of promoting and advancing the cause of social justice through education, and promoting high professional standards amongst teachers.

Over the years, the BUT has become well known for its trade union work. This is to be expected. However, going forward the union needs to place greater emphasis on the professional development of teachers. I propose that the discussion on the professionalization of the teaching service starts with the licensing of teachers. Akin to this, it should be mandatory for teachers to complete a three months refresher training

course every five years. This would serve a dual purpose. Firstly, it will lead to the retooling and upgrading of the knowledge, skills and competencies of teachers. Secondly, it can contribute to a reduction in the level of class room burnout which teachers now experience.

In its formative years, the BUT can attribute its success to the existence of a vibrant shop stewards body. This body also served the dual role of mobilizing the membership, and generating a level of interest and active participation of members in the life of the union. It is my opinion that across the country, trade unions have lost their way as far as having vibrant working shop stewards bodies is concerned. From my observations, BUT through its reenergized school visits programme, has been making an effort to connect with the general membership. However, this cannot be a substitute for an active and vibrant shop stewards body.

It has to be recognized that organizing, quality representation and the active participation of members, rest at the core of the trade union existence. The BUT must therefore work to revitalize the Stewards Body as a means towards reenergizing the membership, to the point that it is constantly pressed to review its programmes in order to meet the demands of an active and engaging membership.

Mr. Chairman, I have carefully paid attention to the changing character of the BUT over the years. My assessment is that the young brigade, to which I alluded to earlier, became the eyes, ears and voice of the BUT between 1974 and the early 1990's. The group was in the trenches organizing, and promoting the programmes and services of the BUT. This seems far removed from what I have observed today, where there are twelve Executive Members, but yet the core of the work seemingly rest on one or two members of the leadership. How can we expect to create a higher level of solidarity and progress in the organization, if those who are charged with the leadership and management of the organization, fail to exhibit the commitment and discipline required. I am concerned from where I sit in the Congress of Trade Unions and Staff Associations of Barbados, that too often the BUT lacks the representation at some important meetings. It is my view that this could only contribute to stifling the progress which the BUT hopes to achieve.

Whilst attention has to be placed on re-energizing the membership, it is critical that equal attention is directed at addressing the eroding membership base of trade unions. The BUT may make the claim that its numbers are on the up. This apart, I urge that we take careful note of the views of the analysts, who contend that the erosion of the membership base is proving to be quite imposing on the survival of trade unions. BUT should not ignore the fact that it like all other unions and staff associations, is facing this

challenge. With respect to the demographics, the BUT should also be aware that it is further stressed by the fact that it has an aging membership; with many of the baby boomers fast reaching the age of retirement.

This situation which is facing trade unions is further compounded by the limited access they have to grant funding from international agencies. The fact that the raising of unions dues is likely to scare away potential members or even lead to the withdrawal of membership, presents a real challenge to the leadership. Against this backdrop, maybe the time has come for trade unions to give serious consideration to agitating for the introduction of the 'Agency Shop' concept into Barbados. This system has been introduced in other Caribbean islands. We only have to look next door to Grenada for some idea of how the system works. With the introduction of the Agency Shop, it certainly assures that both members and non-members of unions contribute to the work of the union; particularly as it relates to wages and salary negotiations and workplace representation.

Looking towards the future, the BUT and sister trade unions and staff associations must place a greater emphasis on investing in young workers. In the past this has worked for BUT. The building of a strong trade union base has always been premised on the notion that there is a need to engage young workers. It would seem that there is a need to embark on outreach programmes that specifically targets this group. It is important that BUT begin to seriously consider programmes and strategies that are directed at addressing the apparent disinterest and apathy of young workers. Unions must demonstrate that they serve a purpose beyond the narrow perception that they are primarily concerned with wages and salary negotiations.

Generally speaking, trade unions must become aware that marketing is the key to their outreach in the labour market. While the BUT is encouraged to pursue this path, it should do so taking on board that it ought to widen its social programmes, and develop sports and cultural activities that are driven by what the membership wants.

In reviewing the past, it is evident that the BUT has become a training ground for many, most of whom have since elevated themselves somewhere on the national landscape. Those of us, who have benefitted from the foundation which the BUT has provided, ought not to forget from whence we came. At the least, such persons should find some way of giving back to the development of the union.

Returning to the issue of the embracing, involvement and exposure of young workers, I humbly suggest to the BUT leadership that this is the way to go in order to address the matter of succession planning. I however hasten to caution that the union should guard

against falling into a situation where there is no clear emerging leader, and worse yet, encounters problem with infighting for leadership positions. This has not been the culture of BUT, and therefore should not be allowed to develop.

As the General Secretary of Congress, I am happy to announce that as the national centre, CTUSAB has officially launched a Youth Arm. The Congress is therefore supportive of the efforts of its member units in working towards the establishment of a Youth Committee. CTUSAB urges the BUT to get on board with this initiative.

As you are aware, young workers are identified as persons under the age of 35. It is perceived that such persons are trainable, enthusiastic and pregnant with ideas. Taking on board the changing demographics of employees within the workforce, where there is evidently an aging workforce; room has to be made for young persons to emerge.

I must reiterate that this is the way to go towards ensuring that future leaders are well prepared, so as to allow for a smooth transition of leadership from one generation to another. As you would appreciate, this is all about maintaining a vibrant labour movement, where there are educated and enlightening leaders.

It is therefore recommended that BUT and all others member units of CTUSAB move to establish or strengthen the Youth Committee if and where such already exists, design precise development programmes for union members and create specific opportunities for young trade unionists to participate in activities including collective bargaining. Efforts should also be directed at identifying young leaders, establishing a mentorship system, and at introducing the use of social media in order to outreach to young members.

This brings me to comment on some actions and behaviours on the part of unionists which are bad examples for our young leaders, and which in my view serve to undermine the credibility and confidence in the BUT and other trade unions and staff associations. I contend that the actions and behaviour exhibited by some of our leaders both past and present, have the potential of helping to destroy solidarity within the labour movement. I certainly have a difficulty with those who preach one thing and practice another. We can only be fooling ourselves if we don't believe that this can impact on trade union solidarity both now and in the future. In total, it can derail the efforts being made to aid the progress and development of trade unions.

Mr. Chairman, it is said that what happens in the past, influences what happens in the present and the future. Reflecting on the past, I have seen a divide within the BUT which I believe the time is right to reverse. I refer specifically to the divide that has led to the

birth of the Barbados Association of Principals of Public Secondary Schools and the Association of Public Primary School Principals. I make bold to call for dialogue to be initiated amongst the players, BUT, BAPPSS, APPSP and the BSTU on the establishment of a single teachers' professional and representative body. In this current environment, it is my considered opinion that it makes good sense for such consolidation to take place. As a compromise towards meeting sectoral interest under this arrangement, there can be no harm done if the decision is made to have divisions established, where each is headed by an elected divisional leader. The mechanics of this can be easily worked out.

We must have the desire to institute organization reform. This is imperative if the union is to successfully champion the cause of trade union solidarity and the empowerment of teachers. To stress the point, I posit that unification of the teaching profession seems to be the logical approach to be adopted, if it is to increase its capability to respond to the challenges facing education in these changing times. The ongoing issue which pertains to the marking of the CXC School Based Assessments is one such case in point.

I must reiterate that the matter of trade union solidarity must not be treated as one of convenience. As professionals there is the need to have an expression of solidarity that serves to unite rather than divide. How else can the teaching profession successfully combat any attempts on the part of the Ministry of Education, Science, Innovation and Technology, to place excessive and unconscious demands on teachers that are accompanied by veiled threats? How else can the profession respond to efforts of the Ministry to impose its will, through the means of applying the big stick approach?

CTUSAB has already come to recognize that there is value in promoting solidarity through a united approach; where the interests groups accept that there is a place for consultation, dialogue and collaboration. Over the past three years, the Congress has been working to establish a Protective Services Group, where the Police, Fire and Prisons Officers Associations collaborate in addressing matters of common interest with the Ministry of Home Affairs.

I now turn my attention to the thorny issue of the invasion of partisan politics within the trade union movement. There is no getting away from the fact that politics is part of the life of the labour movement. Be that as it may, the members and leadership must carefully weigh the extent to which partisan involvement would benefit the cause of labour. It may be best that our trade union leaders avoid any alignment with political parties; covertly or otherwise.

As a proud longstanding member of the BUT, I urge the membership and leadership to frown upon any efforts to divide it politically. The membership should guard against the

infiltration of political cells within the organization. As far as I am concerned, it should be clear to a blind man on a Trojan horse that those with political interests may tend to promote agendas that are not in the best interest of the union or the movement. Political posturing by our labour leaders will certainly undermine the confidence of the membership, and the efforts which are directed at building trade union solidarity.

BUT is therefore challenged to work to ensure that the integrity of the organization is not destroyed; for this can prove to be disastrous to maintaining the membership base, the solidarity it promotes, and moreover; the respect that it has earned over the years.

Mr. Chairman, I now turn my attention to BUT's role as a professional organization in working to improve standards within the teaching profession. I am a firm believer that good leadership contributes to the success of any organization. Over the years BUT has benefitted from good leadership, and today it continues to enjoy the same under the stewardship of Bro. Pedro Shepherd. I am sure that if our late distinguished leader, Bro. John Cumberbatch were here this evening, he would have proudly raised his clinched fist, on hearing the words of Bro. Shepherd which he echoed on the BUT Teachers' Corner Programme in the month of February this year. Bro. Shepherd was quoted as saying:

"If one teacher has a problem, I am prepared to give my life to defend it."

Bro. Shepherd your words are encouraging, and I say that they represent the level of commitment that we expect from those who offer themselves to serve on the BUT's Executive Board. The BUT must continue to attract persons who are committed to serve at the leadership level. BUT and all other trade union organizations should denounce any individual who display opportunist tendencies. I contend that trade union organizations should not be used expressly for the purpose of advancing personal agendas and ambitions; including the quest for a higher calling outside the labour movement and the teaching profession.

Mr. Chairman, I will now address the issue of leadership across the school system, which in my opinion has remained a perennial problem that has engaged the attention of the BUT. It is amazing that in the year 2015, little seems to have changed.

In my President's Remarks to the 24th Annual Conference of this union, I commented on this issue. For the benefit of those who were not around then, I take the liberty to repeat what I said, in the hope that it would inform how the BUT continues to press its demands for enhanced professionalization in the management of our schools.

"I suggest that principals and persons aspiring to such office should develop these four main qualities as identified by educators Hellriegel and Wolman. These are:

- ✓ Developing visionary skills.... i.e., to have the skills to pull people towards them.
- ✓ To have the skills to effectively communicate with others.
- ✓ To be able to recognize his/her own strengths and weakness
- ✓ Most importantly, to develop the skill of power sharing with subordinates. This means that the leader allows the followers to share developing strategies, and recognizes that effective leaders are not dictators, but are sensitive to the needs of others."

I must add that I went on to say, "Principals who by their actions reflect that they are persons of integrity, would merit the respect and loyalty of staff.If these are observed, it would augur well for developing better management employee relations in our schools."

We are all aware that teachers are the subject of public bashing when the union calls on its members to respond to complaints of unwarranted action and unprofessional conduct on the part of Principals. The BUT cannot fold into the pressure of the public. I contend that BUT and the other professional and representative bodies of teachers, should see the importance of coming together in order that they can speak with one voice on issues that bear heavily on upholding both ethical and professional standards. May I remind you that a house divided amongst itself, cannot stand.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a fact that the BUT is one of the success stories of an independent Barbados. Its success can be attributed to the work of a number of persons, inclusive of pioneers, the late Marjorie Marshall, John Cumberbatch and John Lovell, the latter who is still with us.

Today we have honoured the memory of John Cumberbatch by staging the Annual John Cumberbatch Memorial Lecture. At the site of the BUT's Waterford Housing Development Project, there is a street which has been named after Mrs. Marjorie Marshall. The headquarters of the Barbados Teachers Credit Union Limited at Lower Collymore Rock, St. Michael, proudly bears the name of John Lovell. Ironically, the BTCCUL was born out of BUT. There is now one distinguished pioneer who is left to be recognized.

This evening I call on the Executive Committee to come up with a suitable way of recognizing the work and contribution of Bro. Carl Springer. It is my hope that an announcement on this would be made before the next Annual Conference.

For the information of you the members of the audience, Bro. Springer was in 1969 elected the first President of the BUT. At that time, the teachers formed a division of the General Civil Service Union, now the National Union of Public Workers. At the time, Bro. Springer was described as the Moses to whom a growing number of vocal assistant teachers turned to lead them out of the political grip which primary head teachers held over teacher trade unionism. Thereafter Bro. Carl led the union from 1969-1973, until it was ready to make its way once again into organizational independence from the general service body in 1974. His contribution is one that is worthy of recognition. I say better late than never.

Finally Mr. Chairman, I close by saluting the BUT on being the responsible and progressive body that it has demonstrated it is.

It has survived both trials and tribulations over the past 41 years. It has continually stood for principle, fairness, equity and justice. We have done it right thus far, and I envisaged that with continued enlightened leadership, a strong and unified membership, and a focus non-partisan agenda, the BUT will continue to be a respected professional and trade union body in Barbados.

Ladies and Gentlemen, once again it was my pleasure to address this 41st Annual Conference, and it is my hope that the thoughts and ideas I have expressed this evening, will engage your thinking and discussion during the Business Session of Conference, and even thereafter.

THE END