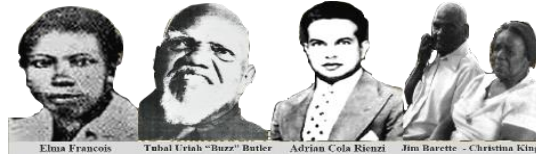


85 Years of Modern Trade Unionism in TT:

JUNE 19 – ANNIVERSARY OF THE ANTI-COLONIAL UPRISING OF 1937



Yesterday, workers took to the streets of Fyzabad and Scarborough to celebrate the 85th Anniversary of the 1937 Anti-colonial Uprising in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean sparked strike which began on the 19th of June.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 1937

The striking workers of the oilfields were joined by the sugar workers, dockworkers and other labouring people across the country in a powerful struggle for improvements in their working and living conditions, for trade union rights and against the colonial order.

The struggle of 1937 smashed across the lines of divide-and-rule among the workers in oil and sugar symbolising the unity of the working class and poor across the lines of racial division sowed by the colonial power.

This mighty uprising of the workers and poor was led by Butler and Rienzi and the Butlerites in the South and by Elma Francois, Jim Barrette and Christina King and the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA) in the North.

The colonial authorities responded with 'Smiles and Blood'¹, calling in the warships, the Ajax and Exeter and unleashing military and police in a fierce onslaught that left 17 workers dead and 66 wounded, arrests and charges of sedition under the 1920 Sedition Act (enacted in the wake of the dockworkers and general strike of 1919) against Butler, Francois, Barrette and Bertie Percival, Royal Commissions – Foster and Moyne – to investigate the causes and propose solutions.

The colonial power and the employers were forced to the negotiating table by the power of the workers' militant actions resulting in wage increases and other economic and social demands being addressed and in the passage of legislation that recognised the Right to Organise Trade Unions.

¹ *Smiles and Blood: Ruling Class Response to the Workers Rebellion in Trinidad and Tobago*, by Susan Craig

Within one year, the OWTU², ATSEFWU³, SWWTU⁴, FTU, NUGW⁵, CSA⁶, RWTU⁷ and TWU⁸ and a few other unions were legally registered.

The unions also built a single trade union federation, the Trinidad and Tobago Trades Union Council (TTTUC) in 1938.

COLA, Workmen's Compensation for workplace diseases and injuries and Old Age Pension also became part of the workers' and poor people's basic conditions of work and life.

The demand for the end of colonial rule and for power to the working class and poor were inscribed on the banners of '*Home Rule!*' and '*Let Those Who Labour Hold the Reins!*'"

This led to Adult Franchise (1946), expansion of Elected Representatives and eventually Independence (1962).

THE SITUATION 85 YEARS LATER

In 1937, the strike of the oil workers that began in Fyzabad evoked the most vicious response of the colonial authorities, the media, business groups and defenders of the status quo largely because of the importance of oil to the wealth and military machinery of the colonial power

Conditions for the workers and poor were also worsened by the effects of the Great Depression and the looming threat of World War

In 2022, it seems like déjà vu.

Eight years of economic depression due to the collapse of oil and gas (the modern 'monocrops' of the economy) prices, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and of Russia's annexationist war with Ukraine, NATO and the US and the general chronic economic crisis have plunged the national economy into a devastating plunge.

The economic pie has shrunk and the various sections of the finance capital modern 1 percent who appropriate economic and political power by force are scrapping among themselves for their share of profits extracted more viciously from the labour of the workers and poor.

For the workers, plant and business closures and 'restructuring' means retrenchment of entire workforces like at AccelorMittal and Petrotrin, or the retrenchment of workers by the hundreds like at TSTT and scores of smaller businesses.

Wage levels are being driven down by growing inflation and the tactics of employers, private and public, by refusals to engage in collective bargaining and wage freezes imposed for as many as 8 years, deep wage cuts, criminal seizure of workers' money (\$565M in 2017 and \$437M in 2018)

² Oil workers,

³ Sugar workers

⁴ Dockworkers

⁵ Government workers

⁶ Public Officers

⁷ Railway workers

⁸ Tobago Industrial workers

by illegal refusal of employers to pay NIS deductions from wages to the NIB, job security is savaged with fixed-term and short-term contracts replacing permanent and pensionable employment in the public sector and private companies with illegal denials of vacation and sick leave to workers on contracts of 3 or 6 months even in Government Ministries and Agencies; relentless privatisation and monopoly mergers of business in the private sector and expansion of local conglomerates and concentration of multinational exploitation of depleting oil and gas resources.

For the working class, unionised or not, the attempt to increase the compulsory retirement age to 65 and cut NIS pensions by 6% per year if a worker retires before age 65 and cap minimum pensions at 80% of the minimum wage. This is the most savage attack on the social benefit of pensions of the workers.

Workers and their families are denied justice from employer and occupier alike following the worst industrial accident in which 4 workers lost their lives trapped in a pipeline and a fifth was injured approaching 4 months ago.

In 2022, 85 years later, the conditions of the workers, not just in the oil or sugar industries but across all sectors of the economy are as Butler described them in 1937 – cat piss and pepper – the most brutal savagery.

ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

During the economic crisis of the early 1980s, the private employers took the lead with the imposition of their 6 or 9% limit on wage negotiations.

As the crisis turned into depression, the Government, largest employer, took over the lead with the illegal imposition of a 10% wage cut and freeze on Increments in the Public Service and Fixed COLA generally. This resulted in a debt of more than \$2B to the public sector workers.

Government continued the assault with a 5% wage cap policy in the 1990s, following a \$4,000 buy-out for no-negotiations for almost 2 bargaining periods.

Today, after refusing to engage in collective bargaining for almost 3 full periods, Government has made proposals with more zeros than a binary code and 2 or 4% increases over 8 or 6 years and the threat of Special Tribunal-imposed 5-year awards if the public sector workers do not submit.

T&TTEC workers in all its bargaining units have had zero awards imposed by the Industrial Court accepting the company's 'inability to pay' based on evidence provided by the employer alone.

The State, the public power is now leading the assault on the incomes of the working people.

With more than the usual mamagism, Government repeats its false claim of 'safeguarding jobs as its priority' and the fake 'choice' of salary increase or your job sounding like a Carnival devil mas, telling public employees, 'yuh money or yuh life.'

This is the same Government that has 75% plus of the workforce in Ministries and Departments, in the RHAs and other agencies on fixed-term contracts rather than permanent and pensionable employment in what the PM likes to call Gazetted public service jobs.

This is the same Government that retrenched all, all, All the Petrotrin workers after their union proposed a 15% wage cut to 'save the company' and that retrenched 700+ and now another 400+ TSTT workers after their union accepted 5% over 5 years.

Wage freeze or wage cut OR keep your job that is not secure is Hobson's Choice for the workers.

The President, the Prime Minister and his Labour Minister, have joined in a chorus on the eve of this June 19 to repeat the message of 'cool it' and 'return to the bargaining table' which no one has left in these negotiations.

Her Excellency said unions "*would do well to also ensure that members understand the harsh economic realities of the labour market...*"

The PM said, "*I will admit that the strong language, which is being repeated in the public space, has left me a bit puzzled, because it does not reflect, either normal industrial relations practice, or the economic realities facing T&T*".

The Labour Minister said, "*In order to uphold the principles of decent work, industrial peace and opportunity for all, we need to persevere in unison*" and "*I wish to reiterate to the Union representatives of the NTAC that returning to the table would be a significant step in the right direction so that as a collective we can re-engage in fruitful discourse in the spirit of tripartism, for the ultimate benefits of the citizens of this country*".

Where is the 'spirit of tripartism' when the Government has refused to engage the labour federations and has gone to the individual unions to push its 65-retirement age and other attacks on NIS pensions?

Why has your Ministry or Government not charged a single employer for the offence of not paying the money deducted from workers' pay as NIS to the NIB?

Why is your Government pushing Bill No 8 of 2022 to "the waiver of penalties and interest" for these criminal employers?

Where, Minister, is the '*fruitful discourse...for the ultimate benefits of the citizens...*' when the OSH Agency of your Ministry has failed miserably in its statutory duty to investigate the most serious fatal industrial accident while you talk of '*safety and health... as Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*.'"

Where is the understanding of the 'economic realities, Madame President and Mr PM, when the employers have already been given \$1.3B of the \$4B 'temporary windfall' that the PM spoke of a couple weeks ago and Government offers, or the Industrial Court imposes zeroes for the workers?

Where is the 'normal industrial relations practice,' Mr PM, when workers make wage concessions and are still retrenched in Government owned companies and enterprises?

Why should the public employees accept your talk of 'jobs first' when the reality is that their job security and minimum labour standards of leave etc are undermined by short-term contract employment in the Public Service and public sector generally?

PASSING MOTIONS IS NOT ENOUGH

June 19, 2022, comes in the heat of a round of collective bargaining that involves a brutal assault on the working conditions of the workers.

What percentage of the ‘temporary windfall’ will go to the workers to compensate for the absence of collective bargaining and salary negotiations and wage freeze for 8 years, the employer’s already collecting \$1.3B+?

What wage increase will apply to the workers’ earnings up to 2022, the current bargaining period that gives the workers some income value and considers the economic state of the country, Government already stating that it will have to borrow to pay even the paltry 2% increase they offered?

Will Collective Agreements be brought current to 2022 or will the unions return to negotiating history in the next round of negotiations?

Addressing these issues, and addressing the assault on NIS pensions and the criminal theft of workers’ money by failure of employers to pay NIS contributions into the NIS Fund, addressing the continuing assault on jobs and job security with mass retrenchments and restructuring and the expanding use of 3- and 6-month oppressive and illegal contract, addressing all these and other issues facing the workers now, what is the trade union movement doing?

Passing a No-confidence Vote in the Government on June 19 alone will be as useless as the Opposition moving a similar motion in Parliament when the Government has a built-in majority and will defeat the motion.

What is needed is a detailed programme of UNITY IN ACTION, a set of detailed demands to protect and advance the economic and social Rights of the Workers and Poor, to safeguard Trade Union Rights and the Right to Basic Necessities as part of a platform To MAKE THE RICH, NOT THE WORKERS, PAY FOR THE CRISIS OF THE ECONOMY AND SOCIETY!

The Trade Union Movement must learn from the experience of 1937 and Unite the All the Trade Unions and the Entire Working Class to Defend and Advance Their Interests!

Decent Incomes for Public Sector and All Workers!

Workers Must Have a Fair Share of the Oil and Gas Windfall !

Job Security for All Workers!

Social Security Rights for All Workers!

Build A Single Trade Union Centre!

Fight for the Rights of All!

Clyde Weatherhead

A Citizen and Worker Fighting for
The Interests of the Workers and People

In the Spirit of the Anti-colonial Uprising
Of 1937

20 June 2022