



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY SENATOR THE HONOURABLE JENNIFER BAPTISTE-PRIMUS,

MINISTER OF LABOUR AND

SMALL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

AT

**THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE CARICOM SINGLE MARKET AND
ECONOMY (CSME) FREE MOVEMENT OF LABOUR SENSITIZATION WORKSHOP**

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23, 2016

9:00 A.M.

- Dr. Olivia Smith, Deputy Programme Manager, Free Movement and Labour, CARICOM Secretariat;
- Mr. Ulrich Thiessen, Project Officer, European Union Delegation to Trinidad and Tobago
- Mr. Joycelyn Francois-Opadeyi, Chief Executive Office, The Employers' Consultative Association of Trinidad and Tobago
- Mr. Robert Trestrail, President Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce
- Mr. Michael Annisette, General Secretary, National Trade Union Centre
- Ms. Simone Young, Director CARICOM and Caribbean Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Representatives of the Employer associations of Trinidad and Tobago
- Representative of the Labour Movement
- Specially invited guests;
- Participants;
- Members of the Media;
- Ladies and gentlemen,

Good Morning.

I thank you for the invitation and opportunity to address you as you embark upon this very timely workshop on the Free Movement of Labour within the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME). As we look at the recent developments in labour here at home, regionally and internationally, I am sure you will all agree any “solution-oriented” conversation on labour in this present climate is productive and encouraged.

In 1989, the Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), driven by a partnership and encouraged by a collaborative approach to regional strengthening, set out a work plan with specific initiatives in an effort to respond to the many challenges and opportunities presented by an ever changing global economy.

Twenty-seven years later, maybe we can say the more things changed the more they remained the same. The global economic outlook is gloomy and not one of us in the Region is insulated from the trickle-down effects. We are all being hit. We are all experiencing the socio-economic repercussions of this global downturn - one of the most critical...**job losses.**

Ladies and gentlemen, I am certain you will agree that there must be a multi-faceted response to job loss. There are solutions to the unemployment situation throughout the region but we have to work together to achieve these creative solutions for the sustainable development of CARICOM. As a community we have to navigate this storm as one, for in the words of renowned poet and teacher, Gwendolyn Brooks, “*We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond.*”

The Free Movement of Labour ensures our region’s citizens are not limited by their national borders in the search of jobs. May I add that in addition to the mutual financial benefits to the free movement of labour for both host and home territories, is the social and cultural benefit from assimilating different cultures other than that of your homeland. We may be a small archipelago, but we cannot deny our varying and unique cultural idiosyncrasies.

The most recent figures available to me indicate that over 14,000 migrant workers from other CARICOM home countries have contributed to boosting the GDPs of host countries significantly, illustrating the symbiotic benefits of the free movement of labour.

At the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development we hold the strong view that a person should not only find a job but that they should be employed in an area, in which there is a mutual benefit to both the worker and the employer. We recognize the importance of “job matching”, where an individual’s skills set is optimally utilized.

The present labour landscape may not always make this optimal matching possible. In very recent times there has been significant retrenchment and while it is not my intention to scare you today but, the facts are indeed sobering. We have large numbers of persons with highly specialized skills returning to the labour market for jobs where their specific skills are no longer required. That ladies and gentlemen is the current reality.

My Ministry and I have been working to carve out solutions to this recent state of retrenchment and have formulated a ten-point plan called “*Empowering Retrenched Workers – Re-integration into Decent Work: Turning Adversity into Opportunity.*”

This Plan is essentially a multi-sector response to retrenchment as we recognize there are social, financial, health and other aspects that are associated with job-loss but at the core, this is a workforce issue and the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development must be the driver.

One critical element of this Plan is the establishment of a National Retrenchment Register, which I am proud to announce, was launched last Friday, March 18. This Register is a database, which allows us at the Ministry to capture critical information on retrenched workers. The Retrenchment Register will provide critical information that would allow my Ministry, other Ministries and agencies as well as other institutions to provide targeted assistance to retrenched workers. The data collected will allow the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development’s National Employment Service (NES), to effectively match the skills and qualifications of retrenched workers with positions posted by employers.

With the development and implementation of job search networks like our NES, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United States Department of Labour's (US-DOL) Caribbean Labour Market Information System (CLMIS), the European Union's EURES and PANORAMA, the CSME has at its figurative fingertips rich quantitative and qualitative data on short- and medium-term skills needs, supply and potential matches. The CSME can also hone in on the indicators of the fastest growing occupations, sectors with the greatest demand for specialized skilled labour and the top "bottleneck" occupations. This is the labour market information that we need to inform a regional response to our regional labour crises.

Ladies and gentlemen, attracting workers may just be the easiest part of the Labour Migration Movement; ensuring equal rights, opportunities and Decent Work for all is the task we have to accomplish and maintain. We can assume that working in another territory could be as easy as working in your own country. However, in the words of Jarod Kintz, "*Sometimes the thing that brings us together also pulls us apart - somewhat like a zipper.*" Reports suggest that migrant workers often face discrimination and obstacles in the recruitment process that applicants who are nationals of the host country are not subject to. This has to become a thing of the past and I give you the assurance that this Government and this Minister are both serious about advancing the agenda of decent work for all. I have previously stated my intention to give priority to revising the present labour legislation and have already began the consultative process on the Industrial Relations Amendment Bill 2014 and on April 8, 2016 we continue this consultative process on the Industrial Relations Amendment Bill in Tobago, where we will hear from representatives of labour and the employers on this critical piece of legislation.

As the Minister with responsibility for Labour and Small Enterprise Development, I encourage my regional counterparts and those in authority to implement measures that facilitate an effective application of the existing laws that govern the free movement of workers and allow the people of our Region seeking better lives not only for themselves but their families, to exercise their rights. Our task at create that enabling environment that satisfies existing demand and creates regional, sustainable development.

The Labour Inspectorate Unit of my Ministry and the International Organization of Migration work together to provide migrant workers and their employers with the relevant information about their rights and responsibilities. Ladies and gentlemen we MUST take the necessary steps to build a genuine CSME Labour Market and your presence here today is an indication that you share the same sentiment.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that we all win with the free movement of labour within the Caribbean Single Market and Economy. It is my hope that all stakeholders involved demonstrate a continuous commitment to ensuring that we safeguard workers' rights and that we do all within our collective powers to continue to develop and revise policies that will foster this free movement of labour.

As we continue to achieve the goals set out in the Grand Anse Declaration we must bear in mind that *“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.”*- the words of American entrepreneur Henry Ford. Ladies and gentlemen our most valuable resources is not oil or petroleum, not cocoa or nutmegs, not the five star hotels and pristine beaches. Our most valuable resource is OUR PEOPLE...the men and women of the region who by their daily efforts, contribute to our regional develop. We all know the saying the chain is as strong as the weakest link. . . now is the time to strengthen these links.

I wish you a productive workshop I reiterate my earlier statement, your presence here is evidence of your commitment to regional development.

May God bless you and the work you are about to embark upon over these two days for the enrichment of our people and the region we call home.

I thank you.