



MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SMALL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

**ADDRESS BY SENATOR THE HONOURABLE JENNIFER BAPTISTE-PRIMUS
MINISTER OF LABOUR AND SMALL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT**

**At the
Opening Ceremony:
2016 Annual Congress of Delegates of the
National Workers Union
at
Conference Room, Royal Rex Resorts
Rodney Bay, Gros Islet
St. Lucia**

June 24, 2016

THEME:

***“Trade Unions must defend economic and
social gains won by the Trade Union Movement”***

The Honourable Allen Michael Chastanet,(recently elected)Prime Minister
of St Lucia;

Mr. Tyrone Maynard, President, National Workers Union;

Mr. George Goddard, Secretary, National Workers Union;

Members of the Central Committee and Leadership of the National
Workers Union;

Delegates;

Esteemed participants;

Members of the Media;

Members of the Protective Services;

Esteemed Ladies and gentlemen;

Comrades all.

I am truly honoured to deliver the Feature Address at the Annual
Conference of Delegates of the National Workers Union on behalf of Dr.
The Honourable Keith Christopher Rowley, Prime Minister of the Republic
of Trinidad and Tobago. My Prime Minister has asked me to convey his

warm greetings and best wishes for the success of this important Congress of Delegates.

I wish to express my profound appreciation to the National Workers Union for the invitation to be part of this Congress. I must confess that when I was asked to represent my Prime Minister to deliver the Feature Address at this Annual Congress, a sense of excitement welled within me. That was attributed not only to the anticipation of being in beautiful St. Lucia, but also to the prospect of reconnecting with some of my good Comrades with whom I would have associated in my previous incarnation as President of the Public Services' Association of Trinidad and Tobago. Today's Congress is reminiscent of many similar types of events that I would have organized over which I presided as the President. I therefore congratulate all of you for making this Congress a tremendous success.

The Theme selected for this year's Congress is quite apt and instructive taking into account today's realities. It serves as a reminder to us that we must recognize and celebrate the history of trade unionism in St. Lucia, in the wider Caribbean and across the globe – a history characterized by

struggle, perseverance and a commitment to improving the conditions of work for millions of workers.

The theme, ***“Trade Unions must defend economic and social gains won by the Trade Union Movement”*** reminds me of some profound words spoken by Martin Luther King Junior in one of his speeches, where he stated that, ***“The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life”***.

The National Workers Union (NWU), which I am sure you are all proud to have built and nurtured, is one such example of the transformative power of Trade Unions. From my understanding, the NWU with a membership of over 5,000 and with more than 55 branches across the country can boast of being one of the largest Trade Unions in St. Lucia.

Under the astute leadership of President General Tyrone Maynard, you continue to be a progressive, dynamic and vibrant twenty-first century organization, fully committed to the service of your Members that spread throughout a number of sectors including the public service, agriculture, hotel, construction, insurance, petroleum distributors, essential services, sea ports, manufacture, commerce and financial institutions. You have therefore played a significant role in building and enhancing the economic and social infrastructure of St. Lucia and, by extension, the wider Caribbean region.

My perspective is supported by Robert J. Alexander and Eldon M. Parker who articulated in their book titled "*A History of Organized Labour in the English-Speaking West Indies*," that, "the organized labour movement in St. Lucia brought about a considerable improvement in the working and living conditions of many of the country's workers, both by collective bargaining and by winning pro-labour legislation." You should be proud to be part of such a Movement.

As we ponder on the Theme of today's Congress and reflect on the economic and social gains achieved through the sweat and toil of the vanguards of social justice and decent work, I cannot help but remember many of our Comrades who would have paid the price of better working conditions and greater equality with their lives.

Back home on last Sunday (June 19), we commemorated Labour Day where we remembered the struggles and plight of great labour leaders during periods of social and economic unrest like Tubal Uriah "Buzz" Butler, Captain Andrew Arthur Cipriani, George Weekes, Albert Maria Gomes, Adrian Cola Rienzi, Elma Francois, C.L.R James, James Issac Alexander Manswell and Basdeo Panday. These giants of strength and determination undoubtedly revolutionized the course of development in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean region.

It is my humble opinion, Comrades, that the legacy of the Trade Union Movement, whether in St. Lucia, in Trinidad and Tobago, in the United States or in Europe, is one of transformative change. I dare say that no other organized group or system in any part of the world has been able to change the course of history as the labour movement has and continues to

do. One case in point is evident from the Butler Oilfield Riots which took place in 1937 in Trinidad.

Prior to this time, there were ongoing tensions between workers and employers in many sectors of society. These were characterized by situations of worker abuse, underpayment for labour, racism, economic depression and a considerable fall in the living standards of the working class. Between 1934 and 1937, workers became more influenced by a need for change resulting in strikes and riots on the sugar plantations and in the oilfields. The actions of workers, instigated by their labour leaders, have resulted in significant improvements in working conditions and wages in many sectors of our economy.

The Trade Union Movement continues to be the backbone to the development of economies worldwide. As one person has stated, “there can be no development without labour and no labour without development.” The Movement effectively contributes to and encourages higher productivity, lower employee turnover, improved workplace dialogue and a better trained workforce. The benefits of the Movement to the economy are substantial, including growth of the national economy and economic

development, increased national productivity and output, increased competitiveness, increased skills development, and a healthier and safe working environment.

Globally, Trade Unions represent the voices and interests of hundreds of millions of workers, bringing together several different types of worker organizations with the aim of defending the interests of workers, regardless of whether they belong to the movement, are employed in the formal sector, or work in the informal economy. The values of the trade union movement have included defense of human and trade union rights, opposition to totalitarian regimes, struggle for social justice, and demands for the fair distribution of wealth and incomes at national, regional and international levels.

We are all too familiar with the economic and social gains realized by the Trade Union Movement. We experience them every day. We enjoy them at our workplaces and in our communities. These gains have translated into a better quality of life for all of us and our families.

The realization of these gains emanate from a deep appreciation of the value of work. Work, as we know, is at the core of people's existence. It gives meaning to life, a sense of purpose and a feeling of satisfaction. Work does more than facilitate the payment of bills – it provides an avenue for self-actualization and self-progression. Therefore, as members of the vanguard movement and as defenders of workers' rights, you are all creators, innovators and facilitators of new beginnings and new dreams. This is a solemn responsibility.

We must recognize that the changes around us will pose a challenge in preserving such gains. Policy-induced structural changes in our economies and organizations, economic and technological changes, changes in production methods and systems especially with the growth of transnational corporations, changes in the composition of the workforce, an increased supply of new entrants into labour markets, particularly women and migrants, and the practice of flexible labour market policies are just a few of the changes Trade Unions must grapple with.

Many of these developments tend to hit at the core of Trade Unionism, in some cases challenging the very relevance of the Trade Union Movement.

In some instances, emerging changes may affect in particular the ability of Unions to organize workers freely and engage in collective bargaining. The ability of Unions to ensure the promotion of fundamental principles and rights at work, including freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining and freedom from discrimination in employment are sometimes impacted by current industrial relations and human resource management practices. The existence of outdated labour legislation further compounds the situation.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), in its World Employment and Social Outlook Report 2015, noted that there has been a global shift to more insecure jobs from the traditional employment relationship to more non-standard forms of employment since the financial crisis of 2008/2009 which fuelled growing inequality and higher rates of poverty.

The Report revealed that it is estimated that only a quarter of the world's workers, that is **one in four** workers, are on permanent contracts with the remaining three quarters employed on temporary or short-term contracts, working informally often without any contract, are self-employed or are in

unpaid family jobs. You will no doubt understand the challenge that such a situation creates with respect to representation of workers.

On this note, permit me to share some insights on the work of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago with respect to addressing contract employment. We have recognized that notwithstanding some workers' preference for flexibility in employment arrangements and less "consuming" forms of employment, contract work is often associated with abusive labour practices and does not augur well for the promotion of decent work. Some of the unfavourable aspects of contract employment include variability in earnings and inability to access loans and undertake long-term financial planning, reduced or no on-the-job training, less opportunity for mobility and increased instability.

I have grave concerns about workers being employed on contract for indefinite periods performing full-time roles. I know of cases where persons have been working in rolled over contracts for more than ten years. This is indeed untenable as workers are unable to plan financially for themselves and their families as well as enjoy basic benefits such as paid sick leave and vacation leave.

It is against this background that my Government gave a commitment in its Official Policy Framework to “review and reform the use of contract labour in all sectors.” We are intent on reducing the dependency on contract employment. To this end, we have started the dialogue with our stakeholders including representatives of Labour, Business and Academia, with the first Workshop titled “*Contract Employment: Reducing the Dependency*” being held in Trinidad on April 13, 2016. Additionally, two months into my Government’s term in November 2015, Cabinet established a Committee to examine contract employment issues in the Public Service in Trinidad and Tobago. We intend to work assiduously with our stakeholders to develop and implement an appropriate Plan of Action that would ensure that contract employment is reduced in Trinidad and Tobago.

Honourable Prime Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen there are also some worrisome trends with regard to unemployment globally. The fact that the ILO estimates that over 70 million people are not in work today, but would have had a job if pre-crisis growth had resumed, and that there will be an estimated global jobs gap of over 80 million by 2020 if weakening economic growth continues, does not create a very optimistic picture. Additionally,

over 70 million of the 200 million unemployed worldwide are young women and men. Overall, two in five economically active youth are either unemployed or working but yet living in poverty.

In the Caribbean context, we can relate to rising unemployment and increasing numbers of working poor. In Trinidad and Tobago, we are grappling with the issue of increasing retrenchment given the challenges facing the oil and gas industry. Added to this are a few unscrupulous employers who deny workers the right to severance benefits and pension plans. The protection of vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities and persons infected with and affected by HIV and AIDS in the labour market are also of serious concern.

While we can spend days discussing the changing nature of labour markets and the many challenges facing Trade Unions as a consequence, we need to move towards solutions. We must seek ways of turning our adversity into opportunity. This is in fact the theme of my Government's Ten-Point Plan on Unemployment which we embarked on at the start of this year in response to the increasing number of job losses through retrenchment and termination.

While I am a full supporter of **defending** the economic and social gains won by the Trade Union Movement, having done so myself for more than three decades while serving at the helm of the Public Services' Association of Trinidad and Tobago, I wish to challenge us to extend beyond defending gains already won to **enlarging** the impact and reach of existing gains and adding to the achievements which have already been made.

In order to do this, we must first step back and do some introspection. In an article by Hannah Blythyn (2009) it was pointed out that in order to move forward in the 21st century, Trade Unions must meet and rise to the challenges of the modern, increasingly global world where the social, labour and economic environments are ever-evolving. How do Unions do this? Who do you reach out to and by what means? Are you clear on what you are offering – to both individual members and society as a whole? Indeed, what are the Unions of today here for?

The answers to these questions are premised on the deep-rooted and fundamental understanding that Trade Unions are mediators of social cohesion, social transformation and social justice. There is however need

for introspection on the *modus operandi* of Trade Unions in organizing workers so as to offer them greater protection from adverse labour market conditions. Unions have to be innovative in creating new strategies to tackle new challenges which come your way. Given the need to also cater for the different typology of workers with more women, persons with disabilities and youth entering the labour market, there is need for specific activities and programmes to reach out to these workers. Hence greater focus should be paid in ensuring that workers' rights on issues which may directly affect these workers such as maternity protection, work-family balance, equal remuneration; training, re-training and job security are secured. I have noted from your website that your Executive is comprised of over 50% women which is commendable. As a woman I understand fully the challenges of reconciling work and family responsibilities. I therefore encourage you to ensure that there are systems and procedures that will assist women in the workplace in contributing to the decision-making process while at the same time reconciling work and family responsibilities

Additionally, good democratic governance is the cornerstone of a strong organization. The strengthening of systems and structures to enhance participatory governance within your trade union, while effectively warding

off unethical practices, will serve to enhance confidence and respect and attract new members. The information and communication technologies (ICTs) available to us today should be utilized in attracting new members and facilitating their active participation in the governance of your Union. The rapid advances in technology, now referred to as the Fourth Wave of Industrial Revolution, is completely transforming the way we live, work, play, mobilise, entertain, make things, communicate, and is driving the profound economic changes that are sweeping across the world. Access to data and information has emerged as one of the key drivers of businesses. We have also witnessed the birth and growth of the digital currency which has the potential to be the most important future currency of the world. How you use this currency to expand your membership and meet the growing and dynamic needs of your members will determine your ability to continue to survive and most importantly represent the interest of workers, especially those who find it difficult to do so for themselves.

The use of ICTs can support the involvement of a diverse group of workers, in diverse employment relationships and with diverse training and experience. There is need to focus on strategies to bring more young workers into the mainstream of trade union organization and to ensure that

there is adequate gender balance within the movement. We should attempt to recruit young workers and invest heavily in training and preparing them for the future. While I am on this point of leadership for the future, some effort should also be made to focus on the secondary and tertiary institutions to bring about a greater understanding and awareness about the roles and functions of the Trade Union movement, especially to those who are about to enter the world of work.

Too many young people do not opt to join Trade Unions. They may know little about the role of Unions and the benefits that are afforded. Their only contact or understanding of the Trade Union Movement is likely to be through the media which may sometimes provide distorted and negative images of Unions. It is our responsibility to change their perceptions by reaching out to our youth and harnessing their ideas and energies in the operations of our organizations. Today social media is proving to be quite an effective tool for reaching out to young people.

As I encourage you to press on in defending the gains you have won as well as enlarging the impact of those gains, I wish to urge you to work

assiduously to strengthening your roles as **Pillars, Partners** and **Protagonists** (the three P's).

As **Pillars**, continue to support the development of your organizations, your Members, your country, your region and your world. Always be mindful that one of your key roles remains that of being pillars of social cohesion, by promoting social justice and social peace and harmony.

Your role as **Partners** in development cannot be over-emphasized. This role has become accentuated with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by world leaders at an historic UN Summit in September 2015. The seventeen (17) SDGs, which were determined after consultation across the globe at various levels, build on the success of the Millennium Development Goals and are integral to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which seeks to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. There is an expressed global commitment as articulated in Goal 8 to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all. Some of the targets which are associated with this goal include:

- ✚ By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value.

- ✚ By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training.

- ✚ Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.

- ✚ Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment.

The achievement of Goal 8 and its related targets is underpinned by a strong partnership approach of which the Trade Union movement is a critical part. I encourage you to work with your Government and join hands with Business, Academia and other stakeholders to develop proper frameworks for the achievement of the SDGS ahead of the 2030 timeframe.

The partnership role of Trade Unions is also emphasized in the Global Jobs Pact which was adopted by ILO member states in 2009 as a policy instrument to address the social and employment impacts of any crisis. It focuses on economic recovery and development, with emphasis on promoting jobs and protecting people, enforcing fundamental principles and rights at work, extending social protection, promoting social dialogue and shaping a fair globalization. In order for these initiatives to be successful however, there has to be equal input and collaboration from the social partners, trade unions being a key player.

I wish to add that your partnership role is also critical with the signing of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change on April 22, 2016. This Agreement brings both opportunities and obligations with regard to employment and

labour. The transition to a low-carbon economy is estimated to generate up to 60 million additional jobs in sectors such as construction, agriculture, tourism and waste management. There is an opportunity to refocus on the creation of green jobs and establish a greater connectivity between environmental protection and employment creation. There is however the obligation to adopt green economy policies, strengthen national partnerships, collect data and share information related to the reduction of the carbon footprint. Governments alone cannot accomplish this ambitious agenda. We need your support.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we have sought to establish an appropriate mechanism to formalize the partnership approach and promote greater involvement of stakeholders in the decision-making process with the establishment of a National Tripartite Advisory Council in March 2016. This Council, which comprises representatives of Government, Business and Labour, provides sound and multi-sectoral advice to the Government on a wide range of issues such as Vision 2030, development and review of Sustainable National Development goals and maintaining industrial peace and harmony.

Finally, I encourage you to continue to be **Protagonists** of change. We must not settle for the *status quo* if it is not improving lives and creating a better society. In order to create this change, we are reminded of the words of the great Mahatma Ghandi that “you must be the change you wish to see in the world.” Progress as we know is impossible without change.

As I close and as you delve into the most important aspects of this Congress, I wish to once again thank you for the opportunity to share these few thoughts. We know that the journey ahead will not be easy. As the great freedom-fighter Nelson Mandela once said, “after climbing a great hill, one only finds there are many more hills to climb.” However, if we continue to hold hands and propel each other upwards, we would only discover that the hills and mountains are easily conquered.

May God continue to richly bless the President General of the National Workers Union; may God continue to bless the Central Committee and Leadership of the National Workers Union; may God continue to bless the Membership of the National Workers Union; and may God continue to bless the new Prime Minister, Government and the people of this beautiful island of St. Lucia. I thank you.