

TTUTA ON TUESDAY

Labour pains

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TTUTA

A PROMINENT feature of any mature democracy is the honest, dispassionate, and informed appraisal of an incumbent government. As the countdown to the general election unfolds, many segments of the labour movement are expressing their disenchantment and disappointment with the Government over its treatment of issues affecting labour.

Many promises were made. Indeed, a “Workers Agenda” was signed prior to the 2015 general election outlining some of the labour issues that ought to be addressed should the PNM form the government. Expectations were high that at last labour issues would be given rightful prominence on the Government’s legislative agenda.

Five years have lapsed and much to the chagrin and consternation of the labour movement not a single piece of labour reform legislation saw the light of day despite public consultations hosted by the Ministry of Labour, wherein several pieces of existing labour legislation were identified for long overdue amendments and overhaul to give greater protection to workers.

While all this was going on, workers were being retrenched by the thousands, paying the ultimate price of economic adjustments, with impotence being the defence of the Government. The capitalist doctrine of demonising and marginalising worker representatives continued unabated. Unfortunately, some labour admonition has been self-inflicted through leaders’ injudicious conduct and unnecessary inflammatory rhetoric.

Once again worker rights took the back seat in the national scheme of things. Notwithstanding the deficiencies of the existing battery of

labour laws that are inimical to workers' interest, the attack on labour was unrelenting, with employers even accusing the Industrial Court of being worker biased, prompting the court president to set the record straight with the startling facts.

Even worse, the Government being the largest employer is more guilty of flouting worker rights and ILO conventions with impunity: signed agreements are not being honoured, health and safety regulations are frequently violated, increments are outstanding for several years, acting and other allowances are unpaid for years, collective agreements are expiring without any attempt to meet and treat with relevant recognised bargaining units.

In effect, an unofficial wage freeze was tacitly imposed through the refusal of the authorities to instruct the Chief Personnel Officer to initiate any negotiations with public sector unions.

Many senior government officials refuse to meet and treat with labour officials to resolve grievances in a timely manner. Issues are only given token attention when a spectacle is made in the national media.

This has been the experience of public sector unions over the past five years at the hands of a government that had two former prominent and vocal trade union presidents as ministers and that promised to meaningfully engage workers in the governance process. Once again labour leaders were neutered into mere bystanders in the powerful realm of government, forced to dance to a different tune, betraying principles they once staunchly stood for.

The advent of the covid19 pandemic may have spared the country of many acts of civil disobedience but anger and disillusionment are brewing among several sectors of workers. This is a toxic mixture that threatens to unleash its social venom if not carefully managed. Going forward one wonders how the next government will treat with the litany of outstanding labour issues given the economic projections. Workers must demand meaningful answers to these questions from all political aspirants.

Evidently there is a dearth of any perceived forceful labour advocates on either side of the political divide going beyond the 2020 polls. Labour leaders must avoid the trap of being used to gain political leverage and be subsequently discarded in the charade of inclusion.

Given the past experiences and the bleak prognosis for the future, labour leaders must cease to operate in silos and unite in true labour solidarity wherein people power will not be ignored by any government. Their modus operandi must define labour advocacy. The pursuit of worker rights must adapt to 21st century capitalist right-wing realities.

It is a calculated game of power distribution that requires astute, visionary acumen. The pursuit of principles of social justice, fairness and equity must be relentless and unrepenting given the consolidation of capitalist power. This may even demand some calculated introspection and internal convolutions.

Workers must be reminded that the rights won over the years of staunch, persistent advocacy must be jealously guarded. Complacency is not an option. Involvement and trade union activism is now a matter of self-preservation. The resolve to pursue the labour agenda must never be compromised by personal political affiliation. Unions are an integral component of any mature democracy. It is a critical platform for workers to hold elected officials accountable.