

ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT, VINCENT CABRERA

SIXTH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE OF DELEGATES OF BIGWU –  
OCTOBER 25, 2014

*1974 – 2014: 40 Years of Trade Union Struggle & Building  
Consciousness among the Working Class*

Comrade Chairman, Honourable Mr. Wade Mark, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Your Excellency Debra Thomas-Felix, President, Industrial Court of Trinidad and Tobago, Honourable members of the Industrial Court, Mr. Kyril Jack, Mr. Albert Aberdeen and Mr. Gregory Rousseau, Mrs. Paula Robinson, worker adviser, ILO Decent Work Team, comrade Ramon Cardona Nuevo, Secretary, Caribbean/Latin American region, World Federation of Trade Unions, comrade Feature speaker-Dr. Jerome Teelucksingh, trade union leaders, Mr. Harry Sooknanan, Director of Labour, Ministry of Labour, comrades of the newly elected Central Executive, delegates, observers and members of the media, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to all our invitees for being present at this our Sixth Biennial Conference of Delegates. Having delivered this address on numerous occasions, I wish to indicate that I look forward to attending a BIGWU Conference of Delegates simply as a guest who will be attentively listening to proceedings of the Conference.

Comrades and friends; quite recently BIGWU conducted the process of elections for a new Executive Committee. At the close of nominations my selected team of representatives had all been nominated unopposed. I wish to express my gratitude to all branches of BIGWU for having supported the nominated slate of officers. I wish to thank Cdes. Hayden Bruce and Tyrone Montrose both of whom supervised the nomination process. They gave up an entire day to ensure that the elections were democratically conducted. I wish to congratulate the entire Executive of the Union for standing for office. In so doing, we must all remember that smart and hard work is what is required in the contemporary circumstances. I want now to officially express my desire for a successful term of office for the newly elected Central Executive who will lead BIGWU for the next four years. **We have now achieved an equal number of women and men comprising the leadership.** We have thus achieved a certain level of gender equity, but we must remember that women account for more than sixty-five percent of the Union's membership.

Comrade Chairman, BIGWU continues to march along a growth path. We have been able to make up for the membership lost through retrenchment which has occurred during the previous two years. Over a dozen new branches have been successfully recruited into the ranks of the Union.

The Report of the General Secretary will provide details but suffice it to say the Union continues to expand numerically as well as in terms of its prestige and influence. There are several factors which account for the Union's successes but the one key factor which is responsible for our success is the commitment and ideological understanding of our leadership. There is no place for apolitical views in our leadership. This should not be interpreted as a caveat to force members to join any particular political party. Rather it should be understood that our union has a proud history of supporting social justice, hence its progressive ideological character and active political stance in matters which speak to social justice and trade union development. Leaders must understand that trade unionism and politics are inextricably intertwined. Our task is to effectively communicate this perspective from our General Council to all our branches.

We shall continue to operate with a focus on solidarity within the context of the wider trade union movement. It is useful to remind all gathered that solidarity is a fundamental principle of the trade unionism. We stand firm with the progressive trade unions. Our members must know by now, that they do not have to await an instruction from the leadership in respect of participation in solidarity activity within the trade union movement.

By instinct or reflex action we have a responsibility to turn up at any solidarity activity and show active support for any group of workers involved in struggle. A blow to one is a blow to all!

This 6th Conference of Delegates must record our great appreciation for the work of the Joint Trade Union Movement. JTUM has become the progressive brand of the trade union movement in Trinidad and Tobago. If we did not have a JTUM we would have had to create one. I wish to state that the JTUM has done more for workers in this country, more for defending the interest of the workers than any other organization. BIGWU shall continue to regard itself as an intrinsic part of the JTUM. I wish to record my Union's and my personal appreciation for the work being done by the OWTU but in particular by Cde. Ancel Roget and Cde. Ozzie Warwick. Comrades, do not relent! Continue the struggle! We also wish to offer congratulations to all participating trade unions for keeping JTUM alive and kicking and making it a household name in Trinidad and Tobago.

It has been said by a noted Caribbean poet that we cannot understand where we are going to, if we do not understand from whence we came. Comrades and delegates, most workers in our country do not understand from whence we came. Some have vague conceptions, others have incorrect perceptions and some others suffer from a total lack of relevant information.

The political directorate which presided over our education policies and school curricula seem to have taken a conscious decision that students should not be taught their true Caribbean history. It is therefore left up to trade unions to communicate this history and carry out programmes of sensitization aimed at building consciousness among all our members. It is imperative that we undertake the task of ensuring that our membership is aware of the history and correct historical analysis. Only when our members understand our history, will they be better prepared to do battle to defend the interest of their members. Empowerment of workers cannot and will not be conducted by employers or government. BIGWU will allocate a greater percentage of funds for solidarity and mobilization activity. We need to allocate funds for what is in fact the most important area of trade union activity. We must remember that nearly all victories of workers have come through difficult and unrelenting struggle. We cannot and must not run away from that fact! Should we fail to prepare the workers for struggle, then surely we must prepare to fail. Strategic thinking and strategic planning on our part must include the achievement of the twin goals of increased levels of consciousness as well as effective mobilisation.

I have come to this conclusion bearing in mind that the history of Caribbean society has been a history characterized by extreme oppression and inequality.

The obvious question here is why does the society behave as though inequality has never existed? What have we done since independence to reverse or decrease the level of societal inequality? Have our political parties properly analysed this matter of inherent inequality? Have the various religions deliberately ignored that matter? Does the political and the judicial system buttress inequality in our society? And what of the trade union movement itself? Do all trade unions see the battle against inequality as necessary or valid? Are the policies of trade unions designed to combat inequality or are we unconsciously promoting inequality? There are many types of inequality, inclusive of inequality among countries and social inequality but as we contemplate these questions it may be useful to consider the nexus between discrimination and inequality and what the ILO has to say on this subject. In a 2007 Global report titled ***“Equality at Work: Tackling the Challenge”***, the ILO comments, and I quote ***“... significant and persistent inequalities in income, assets and opportunities dilute the effectiveness of any action aimed at combating discrimination. This may lead to political instability and social upheaval, which upsets investment and economic growth.”***

Delegates and observers, the labour market generates unacceptable levels of inequality. Income inequality is perhaps the most immediate and the most relevant form of inequality for workers in general and for trade unions and their members

in particular. I submit that there is a definite correlation between levels of inequality and the relative power of trade unions. Where the employers are stronger the level of inequality is increased. This balance of power is largely determined by government policy, legislation and the extent of unionisation existing within the labour market. Comrade Chairman, we must ensure that our members are aware of the origins of inequality, the disastrous consequences of unjustified levels of inequality and what has to be done to reverse present levels of inequality in Trinidad and Tobago.

Nowhere is income inequality as extreme as in the finance sector which is the very engine of the capitalist system. As traditional industries are converted into sunset industries and as more emphasis is placed on the invisible economy as distinct from the real economy, more workers are being employed within the finance sector which includes banks, insurance companies, credit unions, mutual funds, etc. In dealing with the trade union response to inequality, the first challenge is the extremely great difficulty which researchers face in the Caribbean as a whole in collecting or sourcing reliable data. While in developed jurisdictions compensation rates for CEO's are known, in Trinidad and Tobago such data is not easily available. Finance managers have ensured that the disparity in salary income within financial organizations remains a glaring example of income inequality.

Remember that the CEO has access to stock options and golden handshakes. Clearly, financial institutions value the CEO more than the worker. Yet the CEO by himself can do precious little without workers by way of implementation of policy. No one will argue against wage differentials but we estimate that the capitalist system places a value of one CEO being worth two hundred times more than the average worker. A recently published TUC report coming out of the United Kingdom and titled "*Executive Excess*" provided a snap shot of top company directors pay and showed that the salary gap can be as much as sixteen hundred to one. This report provides a variety of data tables, presenting information on top directors' total earnings and basic salary alongside average employee pay. In Trinidad and Tobago, in the area of income inequality, a 2007 – 2008 report illustrates that CEO pay increased by more than fifty percent over a five year period. Executive pay is cited as having more than doubling over the period to an annual average of \$963,234.00. The comparison between this and general wage increases strongly suggests that the share of national income allocated to wage earners in contrast to executive compensation earners and others in the professional management stream is grossly unequal, corroborating the observation that that growing income inequality is one of the negative features of globalization.



In a recent statement, Professor Emeritus Dr. James Millette said and I quote ***“Banks, insurance companies and other financial companies have become major players in the fields of industry and commerce, in high stakes speculation and leveraging in the world’s most important commodities, and the world’s most valuable assets. For many of them it is an all or nothing game, facilitated by the generosity of the world’s largest central banks and the world’s most powerful countries. Many of them are now considered ‘too big to fail’ and in the final analysis extraordinary measures to save them from liquidation and bankruptcy’ at the tax payer’s expense, have become common place.”*** The module used by Howai at CLICO is beyond logic. The state used taxpayers’ money to bail out CLICO, only to announce his government’s intention to abandon the much heralded ATRIUS, and surrender the company to the private sector. When we compare this with the treatment meted out to the retrenched workers of CLICO, CIB and British American Company that comparison would show a total disrespect for ethics and industrial relations principle on the part of the Central Bank and the Minister of Finance. State funding made TTMF a giant in housing finance; it is a pity to see the economic arrangement turned around in favour of the private sector and to the detriment of aspiring homeowners.

Comrades, a few days ago the Business Guardian sought to give the impression that bank workers had been gaining wage increases at a faster rate than the rate of increase in shareholder value. This of course is a total fabrication. We did the maths. Profits and increase in shareholder value far outstrip increases in wages at every turn. For every three year period, the rate of increase in profits posted by the finance houses far outweighs the rate of increase in workers' wages. During the period referred to by the BG, out of the eight banks mentioned, the union negotiated collective agreements for workers at Republic Bank and First Citizens. Analysis would show that salaries increased at Republic Bank by fifty-one percent over a ten year period or by an average of ten percent an annum. This is far less than the 144 percent increase falsely and inaccurately printed by the BG. The article forgot to deal with accumulated inflation of 76 percent which severely eroded purchasing power of workers. If we look at our patterns of application of wage increases, we will see that application of strict percentage wage increases, to which we have become accustomed, serves to provide for an ever increasing wage differential between jobs. The concept of equality within a bargaining unit seems to have disappeared. Every additional dollar gained through collective bargaining is another step in decreasing income inequality.

Government will do well in internalizing this concept and stop being an aggressor to trade unions in their efforts to improve the standard of living of working people who are the people that really run this economy minute by minute every minute of the day.

Cde. Chairman, earlier I described the great challenge faced by researchers in the Caribbean. In the recent budget debate, it was revealed that this country suffers from an almost total absence of reliable, labour market information. The Labour Market Information Council has been disbanded and the Central Statistical Office has been inoperable for a significant period of time. At the best of times labour market information is severely dated. The matter does not end there. Unavailability is caused in the main by reason of so-called confidentiality. It seems that there is a plan or a conspiracy to have the people live in ignorance, starved of information on matters on key issues. Economic and labour market data ought to be available not only for effective planning, but for participants in the labour market to be better informed when making choices and for trade unions in particular, in order to respond properly to developments. Given the admission by a key government minister that it is difficult to collect reliable labour market data, how does the State formulate employment policy?

It would appear that the various regimes have either shown a total neglect of policy making in respect of employment matters or at best a mere knee jerk reaction to labour issues as they arise. Stakeholders have been amazed at policy decisions taken or not taken by successive governments as it relates to employment policy. Put simply, there is no official employment policy existing in Trinidad and Tobago.

From independence to the present, labour matters have suffered greatly from indifference, negative bias and outright neglect. I am willing to debate this matter with anyone at anytime, under the following headings; Labour Legislation; Contract Labour; Cipriani College of Labour; appointment of Industrial Court Judges and appointments to State Boards. Comrades all, like many other trade unions the BIGWU had high hopes for the incoming Peoples Partnership government as far as labour legislation is concerned. Various governments since Independence have chosen to introduce labour legislation which regulates and limits trade union activity thus tilting the balance of power in favour of employers. Employment law has always been based on regulations. Let me say for the umpteenth time; our labour laws do not meet the established international labour standards. When will we get a government that will be conscious enough to put an end to the embarrassment faced by Trinidad and Tobago every June, when the Standards Committee releases its report in Geneva?

We have the worst employment laws in the Caribbean and the absolute worst laws for granting workers the right to collective bargaining. Just imagine it took the RRCB five years to process BIGWU's claim for recognition at the Central Bank and already our application for certification at the Royal Bank have been postponed for four years. Royal Bank the most viciously anti union bank in our country has retrenched over three hundred workers and is now forcing workers to work on Saturdays. **Perhaps the greatest scandal pertaining to the State's administration of labour matters lies in the fact that after almost a year the Government has failed to reconstitute the Registration, Recognition and Certification Board.** While the Hon. Errol McCleod was a trade union leader, he like other trade union leaders condemned the then government over the same matter. It is ironic now that McCleod the Minister has an opportunity to fix things he has not done so. Indeed there are many in the labour fraternity who say that he has performed worse than any of his predecessors. Thousands of workers in this country are being denied the right to collective bargaining because of an archaic system of certifying trade unions exacerbated by the non-appointment of a new Board after the expiry of the life of the old Board on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2014. **This is a national scandal!** Workers rights to collective bargaining are being denied and this matter affects all trade unions.

**I wish to use this occasion of our Conference of Delegates to call for a rights based system of industrial relations in Trinidad and Tobago.** Our society is based on denial of rights to the majority. Today our trade union rights have been denied. This must stop! We demand that workers rights be appropriately protected. The law must be clear on workers rights.

Delegates and guests, Panday's UNC introduced the concept of a universal minimum wage. That regime chose not to amend the nefarious Industrial Relations Act. Manning's PNM passed a watered down Occupational Safety and Health Act. Persad-Bissessar's Partnership legislated Maternity Leave of fourteen weeks but it must be noted that a few trade unions including BIGWU had already achieved that standard in some collective agreements. Failing in its undertaking to amend the IRA, despite the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee (IRAC), having already submitted its report to the cabinet, this government has displayed a most disgraceful performance as far as reform of Labour legislation is concerned. I understand that a consultancy has been awarded to have the matter forwarded. It is almost certain that given the several layers of bureaucracy to which legislation is subjected before assent and proclamation, that we will not see any new law to amend or replace the IRA before the upcoming elections. You see labour legislation will not be pursued with the same vigour and energy as say, the constitutional amendment to introduce run off.

Research has shown that the IRA itself was passed within a period of twenty four hours. Legislation can be rushed through both houses of parliament when the ruling class sees the need to repress the working class or to give a legislative pass out of jail to their friends and financiers. Section 34 and the Run Off law were treated with an urgency that the PP government has not attached to labour legislation.

Precarious work has exploded exponentially in this country. Manning entrenched contract labour in the public sector and Persad-Bissessar ensured its proliferation. Labour officers at the Ministry of Labour are all employed on very short term contracts. Not one is a public servant employed within the public service. Imagine we have to appear before contracted labour to grieve contract labour issues. BIGWU supports the ratification of ILO Convention 189 and the inclusion of domestic workers within the definition of workers in the legislation.

During the past two years, there have been numerous struggles internal to the Union. I wish to refer to just a few of these matters. Firstly, it should be noted that one of the greatest violations of the principles and practices associated with the free collective bargaining process has been employers which fall under the unwelcome oversight of the Inter Ministerial Committee previously known as the Public Sector Negotiating Committee (PSNC).

Negotiations of these first agreements have been delayed and grueling meetings with Larry Howai have simply not been productive. Whether it is for revision of existing collective agreements or for the negotiation of a first collective agreement, we can cite experiences at the Export Centres Company (ECCL) where negotiations have been five years in the making and those at Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Solid Waste Management Company Ltd. and the Environmental Management Authority where negotiations have also been protracted. This has been also been the experience at CARIRI and TTMF. The CPO continues to be detrimental to the interest of workers and in particular to the process of collective bargaining. We have no choice but to continue protest action on these matters. Workers should remember that in this period of pre elections, we need to make our voices heard and have all outstanding negotiations settled now!

I wish to use this opportunity to remind delegates that the leadership of this trade union was unfairly criticised by the former Chairman of First Citizens for not encouraging workers at that bank to purchase shares. They criticized us for not being part of the scheme of divestment. We have categorically rejected that criticism as one without basis, but for a society that seems to have as its only value, the value of money, we wish to indicate that workers at the Bank made their own choices.



The most glaring example of insider trading was exposed at First Citizens. This corrupt act of pecuniary self interest revealed a systematic breakdown of securities exchange governance due to the lack of adequate and effective securities legislation. However, the former Chairman and her Board of Directors showed unashamedly a total disrespect for ethics and morality in the handling of public affairs. I wish to use this occasion to record our Union's displeasure at Michael Annisette's public utterances when he accused me of misleading workers at First Citizens. BIGWU as a unit of NATUC is very concerned that the General Secretary of a trade union federation can attack the leader of one of NATUC's unit with impunity. Who is misleading workers? An individual who has taken up a principled position or an individual who uses the dollar bill as the standard to judge everything and everyone and whose global body has rejected his views on privatisation? The policy of the BIGWU does not support privatization. We will not participate in the dismantling of the State sector. In the long run privatisation through divestment leads to increasing levels of inequality.

The Labour Minister seems to have washed his hands of Cipriani College of Labour and Co-operative Studies. He attends no graduation ceremony of the College; he attends to none of the functions of the College.

I was flabbergasted when it was reported that he did not directly intervene in the Cipriani negotiations because he felt that would have been a conflict of interest. It is well known why we have rejected the five per cent wage increase. For all the same reasons we have also rejected the nine percent wage increase. Nine percent cannot deal with a workforce that is compensated at 23 percent below market rate. In addition to the problems of industrial relations at the College, there are serious safety and health problems; there are problems related to students and the professional employees. The College is in need of a major overall and I wish to recommend that all managerial employees be made to pursue a course in industrial relations at the college; reason being that for an institution that uses the words “Cipriani” and “Labour”, it seems that very few of them are aware of fair and proper industrial relations practices or principles. The College generates more disputes than the URP and CEEPEP put together. It is a great irony that a Labour College treats its workers as though they were labourers without rights. Ignorance of industrial relations and managerial power makes for an explosive cocktail indeed. CARDI workers continue to be victims of injustice. They have lost their right of recourse to the Industrial Court and is at the mercy of an uncaring management who has no problem with the denial of collective bargaining rights for these workers and refusal to make retroactive payments.

BIGWU has written to the Caribbean Congress of Labour to deal with this CARDI matter. We shall also be writing to the CCL raising with it the worrying feature found in our system of industrial relations that a number of workers in the Caribbean are being denied the right to association due to immunities conferred on the employers by treaty leaving the workers at the mercy of merciless employers. These include the workers at CARDI, Embassies and High Commissions and lately even the Caribbean Court of Justice.

Comrade Chairman, comrade delegates, the common thread running through this address is the thread of unfairness and injustice experienced by workers and trade unions in Trinidad and Tobago. These concepts are not unique to our times and are certainly not unique to Trinidad and Tobago. It is a stupid person who sits on top of a pile of mess, analyses the mess but does nothing about that mess. The mess can be described in one word. That word is injustice! Injustice at the workplace is linked to injustice in the society. We therefore must deal with injustice anywhere it exists.

Comrades, in 2005, ORIT the regional affiliate of the then International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) at its 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Continental Congress stated at page 7 of its background document that..

**“the Congress intends to summarise the important themes that are at stake; in addition to global solidarity, social justice and development have traditionally been part of the ICFTU/ORIT goals.”**

This is ORIT an organization that some of us had regarded as being under the influence of the Americans. In any case I am here after 39 years of active duty in the trade union movement, humbly recommending that workers problems are part of the major sickness of capitalist societies, correctly described as social injustice. It is evident that capitalism has failed as far as inequality is concerned. There is international acceptance of this. You see my comrades, when workers effectively understand this argument they would no longer rely purely on industrial relations matters as the *raison d'être* for trade unions. Finance managers have ensured that the disparity in salary income within financial organizations remains a glaring example of income inequality. For trade unions, they would begin to see that similarly to our Butlerite fore-parents, that labour issues are tied up with social issues as well.

In the Trinidad and Tobago context, we have seen the emergence of two major parties existing on the basis of ethnicity. **This is because most people see the society as being divided into two ethnic centres. I don't. That is when you look on the surface.**

**I see a society in which the working class and the middle class are similarly oppressed. The working class and the middle class mostly depend on the job market for their survival and is comprised of the two ethnic grouping. The employer class similarly comprises the two ethnic groups. So, we are all Trinidadians and Tobagonians but the society is not ethnically divided it is divided into classes and so many continue to refuse to see and understand this basic but fundamental societal reality. Nearly everyone in Trinidad and Tobago has a grievance. Nearly everyone suffers an injustice. Trade unions therefore need to combine with civil society organizations as part of the struggle against social injustice. This includes, NGO's representing a wide range of societal issues. **As Nurse had long ago indicated, the trade union must not remain at the factory door, but rather must exist throughout the society.****

I wish to congratulate the Youth Committee for submission of a work plan and for keeping the Union's banner alive. Its leaders must be congratulated. The involvement of young persons in the trade union movement is an uphill task internationally and I submit that BIGWU has to pursue a creative path of affirmative action in ensuring the input of young people in all trade union related activity.

Finance workers continue to exist in an environment pregnant with challenges.

The previous two decades have seen the capitalist system lurch from a crisis of debt, to the much documented financial crisis to the present growth crisis. The world is now painfully aware of the real value of state regulations, and has moved away from any notion of self regulation. We continue to witness the major players in the global financial system breaking laws and paying huge fines.

The major global investors and the major western liberal democracies have all held up the market as the arbiter of all things economic. We must insist on the realities of the social market and it is painful to see some trade union comrades and the government adopting the same remedies which have been advanced by the International Monetary Fund and the Washington consensus. The State must support active labour market policies since economic recipes which work in normal economies has not, is not and will not work in the skewed economies of the Caribbean, with its bifurcated labour force, where market information remains the private property of the investors.

It is ironic that a government which promised to serve the people, reform labour legislation and place the trade union movement at the centre of national development now finds itself alienated from the trade union movement and castigated by workers.

The Kamla/McCleod regime has dragged two trade union leaders before the Courts. In one case a major State sector company is wasting money by litigating against Cde. Ansel Roget and in the other case the Minister himself is litigating against Cde. Watson Duke who dared to protect his members from nasty and unsafe working conditions.

This 6<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference must set a clear agenda for the ensuing two year period. That agenda must prioritise the struggle against precarious work and privatization. I see these as the twin evils of employment and it should be noted that all global unions agree with this position. Delegates and friends, workers will have no capacity for participating in struggle unless their consciousness are raised and their levels of mobilisation are increased and so the work of the union must be crafted around building consciousness and increasing levels of mobilisation.

In Trinidad and Tobago, Labour is not treated as a legitimate stakeholder! In fact we are certainly treated worse than shareholders! Allow me to quote: **“Labour is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labour and could never have existed if labour had not first existed. Labour is the superior of Capital and deserves much the higher consideration.”**

This is not Roget, Cabrera, Remy, Prentice or Crichlow; but rather Abraham Lincoln, the American President, in 1861.

I conclude this statement by urging all branch officers and shop stewards to realise that we must be agents of change, we must all be revolutionaries. We cannot begin to think about the future when the future is upon us. This 6<sup>th</sup> Conference of Delegates must energise participants to boldly carry the message to all branches. We must be convinced in our brains; clear in our minds; and sure in our hearts of the legitimacy and validity of our mission. That mission which began when our Butlerite fore-parents struck a blow for liberty; a blow for dignity and a blow for the advancement of the working class. We vow to continue that tradition and to deliver victory to our members and to the working people of Trinidad and Tobago. That has been our learning, that has been our experience and that has been our tradition. From 1974 to the present through 40 years of trade union struggle we have no alternative but to continue to build consciousness among the working class despite any and every obstacle or challenge which may present itself.

I THANK YOU!

**25/10/2014**