

We too have a dream

As part of our project work in the FES-PSI 2011-2013 project, we chose to focus on trade union renewal. Some also refer to it as trade union self-reform. Throughout the world, many trade union organisations are thinking about, discussing, developing and implementing strategies on this issue. So much has happened since the founding or registration of unions that it is impossible to continue to operate in the same way as when they started and yet expect the same or even better results. We also decided to narrow our focus to unions in the public service sector.

As young activists in the trade union movements in Bermuda, Jamaica and St Lucia, we are well aware of many of the challenges and difficulties that our unions face. In this century, business is not as usual. Globalisation has taken hold. And in many ways it is an unfair globalisation. The global crises (financial, food and climate) which all came to a head in 2008, the collapse of current economic models all combined to create a perfect storm for many. It was like being punched in the gut. Here in the Caribbean, we had never seen anything like it. And because of the structure of our countries we were watching what was happening in the US, Canada and Europe to get some idea of what to do. In the first year or two, we were all still trying to figure out what would happen and how we could recover. Five years on, the effects are really hurting and we find ourselves even more overwhelmed. Just as we think we are getting a handle on things, some other devastating thing happens and we have to re-think, re-group and start all over again.

The Caribbean – small open economies ranging in population size from 5,000 in Montserrat, half a million in the Bahamas and Suriname, 2 million in Jamaica, to 10 million in Haiti – are still rattled. Developments over which we have had no control and which take place many thousands of miles away, impact us almost immediately.

In the Caribbean where we have first-hand evidence of the value of public services, we are still seeing and feeling the attacks. The liberalisation of trade, the view that the market will take care of everything, the belief that some have that government is inherently inefficient, are the things that are attacking us. And our unions seem not as prepared as they should be to deal with all these challenges and attacks. Many are overwhelmed.

As Caribbean trade union activists, we chose to prepare this paper to start a serious and in-depth conversation on trade union renewal or trade union self-reform.. We want to engage young trade unionists, future trade union leaders and activists, as well as current leaders, in deep and thought-provoking debates on the future of our unions in the Caribbean. We also want to engage the wider membership throughout the Caribbean in this discussion.

While many of the points raised apply to all Caribbean trade union organisations, this paper focusses especially on public service sector trade unions in the Caribbean.

We engaged in desk research – it was a lot of reading. And we mean a lot of reading. This is a very hot topic at the world level. In some ways it was a relief to know that large

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and small unions worldwide were examining this issue. We recognised early that we are not alone. One glaring fact is that there is little research, briefings or positions written or commissioned or published by the Caribbean trade union movement. We believe that our effort is a start in building up a reservoir of information and necessary research that can help future activists.

We conducted surveys among union members. We wanted to find out their views about the trade union movement and what they wanted to see from their unions. In many instances we surveyed the wider membership. But we also paid particular attention to gathering the views of the members who were 35 years and under. The information gathered was much more than we expected. And we hope to publish the in-depth results of the surveys separately.

The presidents, general secretaries and other active members in our unions were very supportive. In fact, it was during our various discussions and interviews with them that we were able to improve our knowledge about our own unions. They were also very helpful in identifying the challenges that they faced in the early days of the union movement as well as sharing their vision of the future. They were inspiring.

Each section in this study builds on the previous one. And in many ways, the points raised overlap each other. We started out limiting ourselves to a “small” position paper. But as we read more, talked more, shared more, the study grew. Without doubt there is more to write, to think about and to recommend. This is the beginning of a long and deep process.

We examined where we are now in the trade union movement. The challenges, the effects of the crisis, the views of members as well as those who have not joined a union. We dug deep into trade union renewal and what it involves. And while we know that many started the conversation long before we did, it is not too late. We understand it is a process and things take time. But we must start now!

We thank FES and PSI for opening the door to a stimulating and exciting exercise that brought together three activists from the Bermuda Public Services Union, the Jamaica Association of Local Government Officers and the St Lucia National Workers’ Union. Living and working in three different time zones we “met” regularly, exchanged ideas, and built a camaraderie and friendship that will never die.

Awareness of developments serve as an indication of the need for the actions that must be taken. Timely analysis of the possible consequences of these developments outlines the response strategy. And an effective action plan determines the results. There is much to be done!

Let us work together to realise our dreams.

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