

Globalization and organized labour in the commonwealth caribbean: opportunity or ...

[Government](#), [Capitalism](#)



Table Of Contents Page 2 Overview “ 4 Introduction “ 5 Theoretical Perspectives “ 8 Threats to Organized Labour “ 11 Opportunities for Growth “ 13 Conclusions “ 14 Recommendations Overview Globalization has been the buzzword in the latter part of the twentieth century and has continued to generate much discussion by persons in all spheres. In most cases it has been a very emotive subject tied up with fear, on one hand, and unreserved acceptance on the other, which is an indication the level of misunderstanding which surrounds this concept. Like mercantilism, colonialism, and industrialization, globalization is seen by some as the natural progression of capitalism by way of expansion of its means of production and control over its markets to force lesser developed states into a global economy. This phenomenon was predicted by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto as a natural progression to an “ institutional innovation of capitalism" where “ the bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most [underdeveloped] nations into civilization...[compelled] on pain of extinction". Herein lies the problem which is two-fold. First, the wide reach of globalization subordinates the power and authority of each state to the hegemonic control of the transnational corporations and their leaders. Secondly, the nature of the changes required to facilitate the advance of these global leaders, imposes social, political and economic constraints and controls on the institutions and peoples within these states which are unpalatable at best, particularly to those in the Commonwealth Caribbean which is the focus of this study. This study, through the use of a review of the literature, attempts to highlight the

threats to organized labour in the Commonwealth Caribbean and to determine what opportunities may also exist or be created to cope with the negative impacts of such a complex phenomenon on an equally nuanced environment. Introduction An understanding of the history of the Commonwealth Caribbean and particularly that of organized labour would shed some light on the why any discussion on globalization would be an especially emotive one. The transition from a slave society where the black masses were seen as property and indeed formed part of the means of production, into one where the same masses now have a voice and can take part and even lead in their own political affairs as sovereign nations, was a process inextricably tied to the development of organized labour. Great gains were made in the Caribbean countries as result of the struggles of the trade unions. It is these hard fought for freedoms that globalization seeks to have relinquished, back into the hands of a new absentee colonial master. “ For those who practice [neocolonialism], it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress. In the days of old-fashioned colonialism, the imperial power had at least to explain and justify at home the actions it was taking abroad. In the colony those who served the ruling imperial power could at least look to its protection against any violent move by their opponents. With neocolonialism neither is the case. ” (Nkrumah: 1965:: xi) Kwame Nkrumah’s summation above of the impact of this tight control on Guyana also aptly describes its impact on the rest of the Caribbean. Theoretical Perspectives The term globalization describes an economic system or to be more precise an economic world order. It is by its nature aggressive and far-reaching, and

thus results in the transformation of the work and lives of the people within the global economy. With the dismantling of the Communist stronghold at the end of the Cold War period, Marxist theory played a significantly less dominant role in the economic development of states. Simultaneously, neo-liberalist theories grew and increasingly became the major focus of thought in the development of economies especially those states outside of the Global North. It is the neo-liberalist thinking of the Bretton Woods Institutions and more currently, the World Trade Organization (WTO) as tools of the new imperialist aims of the USA that have pushed globalization as the natural progression of economic growth and modernization. This school of thought is prescribed by the laissez-faire doctrine of 18th century philosopher Adam Smith, whereby market forces are to be free to pursue their immediate private interests and be subjected to minimal government regulation. (Pinder: 2007) Liberalism sees globalization as not only progressive but benign, as an extension of a long term trend of deepening international interdependence which augurs for the world in general. It is viewed as an “objective historical process reflecting the fact that the modern productive forces have outstripped the social relations that are bound up with national or even regional geographic boundaries”. (Campbell and Nugent: article) In the liberalist view, globalization completes the process of capitalist integration of the entire world and in the process creates a global system of capitalist commodity production and exchange. This challenges each social class and individual to try to understand where the world is heading and where they fit in. These challenges are compelling all types of organizations to restructure themselves to fit into the new economic revolution. This

economic revolution is based on the ongoing scientific and technological revolution, namely the process of digitization. The result is the need for constant innovation and flexibility. Reformist liberalism embodies a naïve optimism that globalization is inherently beneficial and employs “modest initiatives to ...correct [its] imperfections. This view treats the market, electoral democracy, growth, national solidarity and scientific reason as timeless virtues with universal applicability, thereby ruling out the possibility capitalism, industrialism and rationalism among other things might be the causes rather than cures of global problems. Hence, liberalism obscures disempowerment and “serves unintentionally to sustain unfreedoms with false promises”. (Kofman: article) On the other hand, the theory of critical knowledge has as its primary conscious purpose to identify disempowerment and promote the politics of emancipation. This discourse recognizes that globalization’s transformational effect should be greeted with neither conservative disavowals nor liberal confidence but rather with vigilance. The theory of international political economy which has received input from the various schools of thought as their proponents grappled with the changes taking place in the world, has contributed to this critical knowledge. The international political economy theory is primarily “concerned with the way people live, and how, and under what conditions their circumstances can be changed, or indeed, how and when changes can be resisted”. (Gill and Law, 1988) Nationalism is another ideology which is important to the analysis of globalization since it is the strong drive toward integration which attempts to remove national barriers and also to erode the sovereignty of states. Threats to Organized Labour The trade union movement has been the vehicle for

organized labour worldwide and more particularly in the Caribbean. If globalization is the advancement of capitalism and according to Lewis and Nurse, capitalism sees “ the union movement as an obstacle to progress”, then it is obvious that inherent in the move toward globalization is the need for the destruction of the trade union movement. Further, while organized labour is the embodiment of “ power and struggle” on the behalf of its working-class constituents, it is this very attribute that is eschewed by mainstream neoliberalism. The role of the trade union movement in the Caribbean as alluded to earlier, has been and still is to protect the rights of working people and advance their interests, socially, economically and politically. It is the scope and intensity of the global restructuring which is taking place that impinges most on the economic foundation of unionism. (Lewis and Nurse, *ibid*) This level of this impact is multi-factorial in the case of the Caribbean because of its history and its geo-economic positioning within the peripheral grouping of states. Globalization is eliminating national boundaries for the purpose of economic and commercial transactions, redeploing international reserves of labour and considerably strengthening the control of transnational corporations which has resulted in rendering most nation-states less capable of exercising autonomy over their domestic and foreign policies. (Lewis and Nurse, *ibid*) Guyana provides examples of the deleterious effects globalization through the Structural Adjustment Programme imposed by the IMF and the World Bank, again tools of the Global North. These adjustments have resulted in “ soaring unemployment and social distress”, which has led to migration and the consequent brain drain. The move to a market oriented economy from a state-controlled one

has ravaged the landscape in this resource-rich country, both literally and figuratively. Guyana is one of the poorest countries in the region today. The conditions in Guyana have resulted in a whittling away of the economic and numerical strength of the labour movement to the point where the trade union movement can no longer “ guarantee workers their hard won rights”. (Pinder: article) These matters have been exacerbated by the fact that the state, under the grip of capitalism, has facilitated the shift of political power away from the unions to transnational corporations. Consequently, many of the unionized jobs no longer exist, almost half of the workers are in waged jobs under poor working conditions with low pay and lacking collective bargaining legislation. The threat to organized labour of the unbridled advance of the forces of globalization is evident in the emasculation of the movement in Guyana, to the point where it was unable to play its role in agitating for the political leaders to “ mediate between capital markets and developing countries...for economic growth with equity, with social justice and ecological justice”. (Jagan: 1995) Similar negative effects of global restructuring have been experienced in varying degrees by the other countries in the Commonwealth Caribbean and indeed beyond. The problem of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) which are out off-limits to the union movement is an expression of the direct threat of transnational corporations to the perceived power of the movement. Even in Barbados which according to Thomas Klak came closest to success in the area of maintaining foreign investment alongside quality non-traditional employment, the unions have not been able to make significant inroads into the offshore sector. In fact, the March 16th 1991 edition of the Barbados Advocate quoted speaking for his

employees Mr. Topfer of Confederation Client Services as follows “ Generally employees feel easier if there are no trade unions. (Lewis and Nurse) The state has played a willing partner in this state of affairs by not highlighting union practices when negotiating investment opportunities and in some cases maintaining legal and administrative restrictions to the right to strike and collective bargaining.(Lewis and Nurse: ibid) The threat of loss of employment is always looming as the transnational corporations can easily move on to another cheap labour source. Other threats to the existence of organized labour include changing work arrangements or flexibilization, and the adaptation of other American tactics when dealing with the unions which will not only continue to reduce its membership but also make it difficult to represent those that remain. Opportunities for growth An integral part of the push toward globalization was the growth and development of communication through digitization. This has been used with great success to create and spread the desires that fuel the exponential market growth. A similarly great opportunity exists for the union movement to utilize the vehicles of communication in order to educate its people in an effort to galvanize them to participate in the fight against the unquestioned control of globalization. The internet is an excellent tool to access training, to share information within the region and extra-regionally, to garner support for industrial action and to facilitate a regional and international integration of the efforts of organized labour. It can also be used to draw attention to the malpractices of the transnational corporations and their supporting states. This is the one component of globalization that the peripheral states can utilize without the debilitating effects of smallness. This use of technology

can provide opportunities for strategic alliances which will strengthen the cause of organized labour. When framework agreements can be brokered on an international basis and industrial action can be orchestrated across borders in the same way that transnational corporations operate, then organized labour in the region can have a chance to restore some of its lost power. The trade union movement has a very good opportunity to strengthen its political influence by articulating and applying critical and innovative ways of thinking to solve the problems being faced by all classes in society at a time when their marginalization is being felt by all alike. Political leaders, non-governmental organizations, and working class as well as white collar workers are all looking for a solution to the problems being experienced in the Caribbean. Now is a good time for all classes to come together in the fight to preserve and to extend the gains made over time. The Social Partnership which has been adopted with some success to help provide a solution in the face of economic the crisis of the 1990's can be strengthened and revamped to good effect. The union movement however needs to take a more prominent role to regain some lost ground among the Partners. Conclusion There is no doubt that globalization is with us and that bound up within it are both negative and positive influences. The Caribbean has already experienced much of the negative impact and is expecting more of the same. However, we do not have to sit by and allow the constraints of the new world order to proceed unimpeded. Indeed, in the words of the former Prime Minister of Barbados Mr. Owen Arthur in his speech to the 15th Triennial Delegates' Congress of the Caribbean Congress of Labour in Suriname in 2004, we must "... shake off the shackles of yesterday's

assumptions which have delivered us into a separatist trap. The logic of tomorrow's possibilities unfolds in the larger context of regional [and international] cooperation and economic integration. " Leadership in the application of a new and critical thinking by labour leaders and the utilization of the new modes of communication to the benefit of the movement and the region as a whole should go a long way imbuing the new world order with the qualities of justice and equity. Recommendations - The education programme on the use of the internet should be extended and enhanced under the umbrella body of unions the Caribbean Congress of Labour. - A mass campaign should be conducted to educate the public on the globalization, its aims and effects. - Efforts should be made toward the institutional strengthening the Caribbean Congress of Labour. - Plans should be discussed and a serious effort should be made to make strategic alliances both regionally and extra regionally. - Efforts at attracting new blood into the Trade union movement in an effort to create new thinking and make it more relevant. - Greater efforts need to made to increase membership in non-traditional areas. - The state needs to play its role in the above by refusing to ignore its social responsibility in establishing a legal framework that is conducive to more equitable relations. Bibliography 1) Arthur, Owen. 2004: Speech to the 15th Triennial Delegates' Congress, Caribbean Congress of Labour, Suriname. 2) Barrow-Giles, C. and Marshall, D. 2003: Living at the Borderlines: Issues in Caribbean Sovereignty and Development, Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston. 3) Campbell, T. and Nugent, R.: Globalization and the Crisis of the Caribbean Intelligentsia, (article). 4) Cobb, J. Jr.: Globalization as an Enemy of the Common Good, Claremont School of Theology,(article). 5)

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