THE FUTURE WE WANT: THE FUTURE YOU DESERVE

Feature Address

Delivered by

Violet Eudine Barritteau, PhD, GCM
Pro Vice Chancellor and Principal,
The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus

To the 76th Annual Delegates’ Conference
of
The Barbados Workers’ Union
Solidarity House
Harmony Hall
St. Michael
August 26th, 2017
Master of Ceremonies, The Venerable Eric Lynch, Arch Deacon of Barbados, General Secretary of the Barbados Workers’ Union, Mrs Toni Moore, members of the Executive Council of the Barbados Workers’ Union. Sir Roy Trotman, former General Secretary of the Barbados Workers’ Union, members of Parliament, members of sister unions, members of the Private Sector, members of the Diplomatic corps, invited guests, delegates to the 76th annual conference including delegates from the University of the West Indies, members of the Media Ladies and gentlemen, a blessed and glorious good morning to all.

I am very honoured that General Secretary, Mrs Moore and the BWU’s Executive Council have extended an invitation to me to address you on the occasion of the 76th annual delegates’ conference of the Barbados Workers’ Union. I pause to consider the serious knowledge your anniversary date conveys. I have to underscore the significance of your “76th anniversary” and the fact that it means you have met annually since 1942. It serves us well to put that in perspective. Last year Barbados celebrated 50 years as an independent nation. When the BWU’s first conference was held in 1942, the Second World War was ongoing. India celebrated seventy years this month as a powerful, independent nation. In 1942 it was a colony of Great Britain, just as Barbados and the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean. And while The University of the West Indies celebrates seventy years next year, when the BWU first met, it would be another six years before the UWI
would come into being. I emphasize your origins, not to dwell on them or in the past, but instead to highlight the authenticity and deep roots of the Barbados Workers’ Union in contributing to building the foundation for the Independent nation, Barbados. The country is now at a critical juncture with tensions in its industrial relations climate arising out of an economically very stressful time for the entire country. Barbados cannot afford to allow the current stresses and tensions to blind us to the fact that just as the BWU has been a foundational organisation in pre independent Barbados, it must continue as a critical institution guiding the formation of new labour practices, careers and industrial relations in twenty first century Barbados. Madame General Secretary, I am humbled and honoured to be here, thank you for inviting me.

I address you this morning from a liminal location, what I like to call a state of in-between-ness. I embody both employer, in this instance, at the University of the West Indies, and employee, I am a fully paid up member of my trade Union, the West Indies Group of University Teachers, WIGUT. Now, WIGUT cannot negotiate on my behalf, in fact the WIGUT starts negotiations on the Cave Hill Campus with the Principal and Senior Administration. But even after I made the transition from a full time Academic to the leader of the Campus Administration, often during tense times, defined by drawing a line between the comrades and the enemy ranks, otherwise known as Administration, I maintained my union
membership. WIGUT happily accepts my dues. In tense times, the Executive may even sound like they want my head, but they know I am very proud of my membership, and of them. Behind the demarcated lines of employer and employee, President Michael Thomas and his Executive of WIGUT and Mr Geoffrey Mapp, Head of the BWU division at the UWI, Cave Hill Campus know that I respect the principles of trade unionism and its core tenet, collective bargaining. Even more critically, I have a deep and abiding appreciation for the cataclysmic role the BWU and other trade unions have played in the political, economic and social progress of twentieth century Barbados.

All economic and social sectors of twenty first century Barbadian society are relevant, workers and their representative bodies, trade unions; employers and their associations; governments, their legislative, administrative, technocratic and policy formulation divisions, and civil society. In Barbados there is no one societal sector possessing moral authority to rank or determine any other sector as having a monopoly over the public interest and for whom other sectors must sacrifice in the name of the elusive, plasticized public good.

I read Mrs Moore labour day address this year and besides the several distressing conditions she identified, May day signals she called them,” it was quite evident that the General Secretary fully embraces and is undaunted by the requirements of leading the Barbados Workers’ Union. What impressed me about
Mrs Moore’s discourse were three key factors she addressed. The General Secretary:

- Acknowledged the challenges confronting the Union,
- Identified the accountability of workers in contributing to economic growth and social stability, and
- Exposed the double standards the Union is expected to endure during times of economic recession.

In spite of these constraints, and again as I expected, Mrs Moore remained optimistic. She mentioned the notion of a better future for workers throughout her speech. I was therefore not surprised when the General Secretary and her Executive invited me to speak on the theme, “The Future We Want”, I have added, The Future You Deserve”. My address is therefore entitled, “The Future We Want: The Future You Deserve”.

I congratulate and commend the General Secretary for her fearless and courageous leadership of the BWU. When she was elected to serve I was very pleased to see a talented, brilliant woman serve her country in this path breaking manner. When Mrs Moore leads the BWU, she attends to the collective bargaining interests of a wide cross section of a vital constituency of this country. I listened to her on a recent radio programme describing how she grappled with and finally
embraced the decision to be put forward to be considered for the leadership of the BWU Delegates, you have an intelligent, committed leader of national stature who has consistently demonstrated a willingness to confront the tough trials facing contemporary trade unions. I was heartened to hear the General Secretary acknowledge in her May 1st address that, and I quote, “there are workers whose efforts come into question” even as she rejected generalizations that workers are not producers or performers (Moore 2017). In charting the future Trade Unions want, its leadership has to acknowledge and address some of the internal difficulties created by workers who for whatever reasons do not deliver on their contractual or employment obligations. Equally, I was even more encouraged by her statement which I fully support, that the Union believes, “that giving everyone a fair opportunity to thrive and prosper is not only an economic necessity but is a moral imperative”.

In determining the social and economic success of a country, no one social sector must be made to bear disproportionately the costs of adjustments as some unwritten, but internalized precondition for economic growth. One social sector cannot be repeatedly asked to bear the brunt of protecting and preserving the so-called public interest, the amorphous, but desired public good. The pains and the gains have to be equally shared if we subscribe to a philosophy of collective,
societal well-being. I believe the history of the formation and operation of the social partnership in the early 1990s, testify to the acceptance of this principle.

As we know, recently the country has been experiencing some heightened strains in industrial relations. As we seek to minimize and move beyond these disruptions, let us not lose sight of the larger principle of shared relevance and civic belonging.

In speaking to my address, ‘The Future We Want, The Future you Deserve’ I isolate some core attributes that should govern the relationships among the various sectors making up the society and that should exist now and in that future which I view as immediate rather than long term. In other words that future you want is now, that future that you deserve is now.

These attributes are:

- The mutuality of respect,
- The reciprocity of accountability, and
- The moral imperative of social justice

I conclude by addressing some planning directions for the Union to ensure agility and ongoing relevance.

The Mutuality of Respect: It would be an understatement to say that the current industrial relations climate is tense and seems filled with charges and
counter charges. I am not concerned with the chronology of events or constructing time lines, attributing blame, motive or praise to any social sector or actors. There are enough pundits capable and willing to do so. I am instead disturbed by the absence of respect for individuals, institutions and processes running throughout these industrial relations encounters. Mutual respect is sorely missing from the public discourse on determining the right course of action for the country. Respect is required now and in the future for the successful growth and operations of the Barbados Workers’ Union.

There has to be broad based societal respect for the Unions’ right to commence and conduct legitimate actions on behalf of its membership. If the Barbados Workers’ Union decides it needs to stage a march to gain the attention of government, all sectors of the society can discuss to their heart’s content whether that action is warranted, or whether in its opinion, it signals the best tactical or weakest strategic action in light of previous actions and anticipated outcomes.

What must never happen is a public disparaging and disrespectful dismissal of the hard won right of the Union to initiate action on behalf of its members. The women and men of the Barbados Workers’ Union are not only union members. They are members of congregations, constituencies and communities. They are parents and dwell in our eleven parishes. They constitute binding threads of the social fabric and social capital of this country; they are part of its bedrock.
To disparage the Union is to disrespect our neighbours and ourselves. In the absence of respect, there is no moral authority and moral authority is a necessary precondition for effective governance and leadership.

The Unions have to be reminded of the mutuality of respect too. Respect is an intangible but vital commodity that forms the basis of sound human relations. I must remind the Unions that the Government, any Government is not the enemy of workers, just as union members are not the enemies of government. I want to remind the unions, Government, civil society and all employers that the real enemy we face in the country today is lack of economic and social progress. This is also accompanied by unacceptable levels of inefficiency that occur in every sector of society, including the University of the West Indies. We all have to accept as our responsibility eliminating these inefficiencies. I reject the idea that workers alone are responsible for inefficiencies in our economic and social sectors but it is a popular and persuasive myth. Similarly we do know, many sectors of the society, including the private and governmental sectors contribute their share of inefficiency to the burdening of social and economic progress. Whatever blocks economic and social progress constitutes a drag on national development. These unacceptable conditions are the real obstacle to our economic and social prosperity.
**Reciprocity of Accountability:** The future you want and the future you deserve has to be supported by a greater degree of and the reciprocity of accountability. Each member of the Social Partnership has a responsibility to honour procedures and rules of engagement. Each member of the Social partnership has to examine and address the challenges existing within its sphere, bring its proposals to the table and avoid highlighting the weaknesses of other partners.

We are justifiably proud of the hard won democratic traditions in Barbados, yet nothing should be and can be taken for granted in a democracy. One of the lessons international events is teaching us is that legislation, rules and conventional norms by themselves will not save us from the worst impulses within ourselves. We have to summon the moral authority to do what is right and what is socially just and that moral authority that informs our actions is preceded by the mutuality of respect and the reciprocity of accountability. Part of establishing that moral authority is to create spaces and allowances to observe, as Colbert King states, “the compassion and commitment that exist in people who operate below the radar, who operate far away from the stage, microphones and cameras” (King 2017). Whose service to this country do we deny or denigrate when we adopt a churlish attitude to addressing the needs and legitimate aspirations of workers who operate below the radar of the public spotlight of traditional and social media?
The moral imperative of social justice: I define the moral imperative of social justice as propelling key actors to do what is just, what is equitable, and what is fair to protect the economic, political and social interests of all citizens, especially the economically and politically vulnerable. I am speaking about the ones who in their daily contributions build and sustain Barbados, but who often are the very ones who do not have easy or automatic access to the corridors of economic or political power.

The country cannot assume that what we have practised for over seventy years in creating a space at the table for trade unions to contribute to national conversations will happen automatically if we did not have trade union leaders who insisted on their inclusion, and political leaders who respected and valued their input. Happily the General Secretary of the Barbados Workers’ Union is a woman after my own heart. No one can accuse her of being shy and retiring and not understanding the responsibility of leading this union. Equally, I am gratified that both within the Governing Party and Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition, the leadership accepts and respects the importance of the inclusion of the role of trade unions in national dialogue on the country’s current state and its future. Political leaders must possess and exercise the political will to ensure the application of democratic practices of inclusion. Political leaders must demonstrate, through renewing the compact with
trade unions, respect for protecting regulations and conditions of service for the sectors and interests trade unions represent.

I wish to demonstrate why we cannot take our current social compact for granted. On a recent visit to New York City where I had studied for two years in the early 1980s, I witnessed a vivid example in a sophisticated, industrialized, developed society, of a city government ignoring or abandoning due care to the working classes in the consumption of cheap, public transportation provided by private sector companies. Other bus companies offering cheaper fares had risen to challenge the older, established companies. The travelling public, in need of savings are consuming these services. I was stunned to observe passengers using these cheaper services in New York City being discharged and picked up directly on the sidewalks of the streets of New York. Not in an area with any semblance of a terminal, not with any seated waiting areas, or public restrooms.

I found it incomprehensible that a city government that had introduced traffic lanes for cyclists and trees and shrubbery in the middle of avenues to produce a welcome greening of city streets, could ignore basic due care for the travelling public in need of cheaper fares. Men, women and children using these services to travel to Toronto, Philadelphia, Boston and Washington DC, stand in long lines in the sun or snow on 34th street between 11th and 12th avenue. A father or mother wanting to change a baby’s diaper would have to do it on the sidewalk.
What level of degeneration in the regulation of public facilities and utter disregard for economically challenged persons, the working poor, would enable a city government to turn a blind eye to the collection and disembarkation of persons like human cargo? It is insufficient to suggest if passengers want access to a terminal, they can use the more expensive service and have access to a covered terminal like the Port Authority Building. These newer bus companies were given licenses and permits to operate profitably without due regard for the comfort of their passengers. Can this type of disregard for the public happen here? No, I do not think so. I do not fear this type of disregard occurring here because I believe our political leaders in and out of government accept the tenets of social justice and our trade unions will hold their feet to the fire. I outlined this situation as a contemporary example of a kind of disregard for working people. It also illustrates we are far more advanced in the provision of basic social services and have to remain that way. We must never allow conditions, “that deprive consumers of meaningful choice and workers of bargaining power” (New York Times Digest 2017) to become normalised.

Finally, I turn to an area of engagement for the Barbados Workers’ Union in ensuring its future now and in a rapidly transforming industrial relations environment, and changing world economy. It is the coming full force of the artificial intelligence revolution that is already underway. According to one of its
leading experts, Kai-Fu Lee, President, CEO and Founder of Sinovation Ventures Artificial Intelligence Institute, the scale and impact of the AI revolution will be larger and faster than the industrial revolution (Lee, 2017).

Mr Lee defines AI, as “technology that takes in huge amounts of information from a specific domain (say loan repayment histories) and uses it to make a decision in a specific case (whether to give an individual a loan) in the service of a specific goal[ for e.g] maximising profits for the lender”. Mr Lee states to understand the workings of AI, think of it as a spreadsheet on steroids trained on big data and that these tools can outperform human beings at a given task (Lee 2017A). Like the Cave Hill Campus, the Barbados Workers’ Union has to embrace the AI revolution. It has to equip itself to advice, train and assist workers with this 21st century revolution of the workplace and life as we know it. The Cave Hill Campus is rolling out its Smart Campus Initiative to harness information technology to equip Barbadian and Caribbean societies to master the coming changes. We have already introduced a BSc in Software Engineering Mobile Application technologies as a first step towards preparing our societies with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Mr Lee provides us with stark realities and positive scenarios. He informs us that the next decade 2017-2027 will be the decade of artificial intelligence.
Speaking primarily of the industrialised, digitized societies, but we should prepare ourselves instead of forever trailing, he states, “In the next 10 years, all financial companies will be turned upside-down, with Artificial Intelligence replacing traders, bankers, accountants, research analysts, and insurance companies. In the next 10 years, AI will replace most factory workers, assistants, advisors, and middlemen”. He cautioned that the impact of AI will not limited to simple jobs. According to him, and he should know he has been a leading AI engineer for 37 years, “AI will also replace many reporters, doctors, and teachers” (Lee 2017 A: 10). Lee states that unlike the industrial and computer revolutions AI is not taking certain jobs and replacing them with other jobs but “is poised to bring about a wide-scale decimation of jobs both lower paying jobs, and some higher paying ones too” (Lee 2017 A). He calls the coming decade, the decade of Confusion because there will be "enormous wealth concentrated in relatively few hands and enormous numbers of people out of work” (Lee 2017 A: 10). He also states in ten years Artificial Intelligence will usher in an Age of Plenty because it will make so much money for humanity, we will make strides in eradicating poverty and hunger (Lee 2017).

This is where the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, the Barbados Workers’ Union and other unions, as well as government and private sector planners will have to collaborate for the larger social good. The University
continues to be driven by its development imperative and its latest strategic plan is entitled, “Revitalizing Caribbean Development”. In that regard, the Cave Hill Campus is prepared to lead in research and policy to reconfigure the workplace through the rolling out of its Smart Campus Initiative. As a society, we cannot ignore or avoid these coming changes.

Mr Lee advises part of the answer involves educating and retraining people in tasks AI tools are not good at. He states AI is poorly suited for jobs that involve, “creativity, planning and cross-domain thinking” (Lee 2017 A: 10). He also advises that there are many promising developments in jobs requiring people skills which AI lacks such as, social workers, bartenders, concierges –professions requiring nuanced human interaction (Lee 2017 A: 10). He states the volunteer service jobs of today may turn out to be the real jobs of the future. He advises that the solution to the problem of mass unemployment will involve ‘service jobs of love’. By that Mr Lee means jobs that AI cannot do, jobs that give people a sense of purpose. Jobs that provide a human interface and involve an expanding care economy. This suggests drilling deeper as one example, into our tourism related services. We will however have to collectively brainstorm to prepare and plan for the social, cultural and economic impact.
My purpose here is to alert us to the coming changes because we usually feel the effect after they have taken hold in highly industrialised, capitalist and now digitized societies. My comments are intended to whet our appetite for what we must undertake for survival and relevance. I do not fear this future for the University and the BWU. In 1942 at the first delegates conference, members came from three functional divisions: Ship Carpentery, The Barbados Foundry Mechanics and the Central Foundry Mechanics. These divisions are gone, but the BWU is still here. Who knows what new divisions will be added by 2027? Will we have a Software Engineers’ division? An Artificial intelligence workers’ division?

The choice is yours. Embrace the coming changes and prepare for them. As the premier higher educational institution in Barbados and the Caribbean, prioritizing a Smart Campus for 21st Century development, the Cave Hill Campus is here to partner to meet Barbados’ changing educational and human resource needs.

Ladies and gentlemen, Delegates, I now declare the 76th Annual Delegate Conference open and I wish you two days of very successful deliberations.

I thank you.

Eudine Barritteau

August 25th, 2017
Eudine Barritteau
References:


