

COVID-19 VACCINATION



...to be vaccinated, or not to be vaccinated, that is the question.



Workplace Mandatory Or A Personal Choice?

Since the discovery of the virus and its declaration as a global pandemic, vaccinations have been touted as a prerequisite for our return to our “normal” pre-

COVID-19 type of social and economic lives. Despite having lost upwards of 500 million lives by July 29, 2021, this pandemic has placed significant hardships on our individual and collective livelihoods, businesses and economies. The medical and scientific communities deserve commendation for the record-breaking speed with which these vaccines have been developed and made available for use.

According to the [CDC](#), studies have shown that vaccination provides a strong boost of protection in people who have recovered from COVID-19 and lowers the amount of virus able to spread in the population, also known as ‘herd immunity’. However, there are several theoretical and practical reasons which question whether those voluntarily “taking the jab” would achieve the [necessary 70% threshold](#) (≈1 million persons) as identified by Dr. Roshan Parasram, Chief Medical Officer (CMO) of Trinidad and Tobago.

Having received an additional 800,000 doses of SinoPharm vaccines purchased from China in mid-July 2021, our Health Services has since surpassed the initial July 30 target of 16% of the population set by the Minister of Health, Dr. Terrence Deyalsingh. This development has

enabled the reopening of the Nation’s borders as well as the return to work for some workers. For some other workers, this improvement means the reopening of their workplaces/offices and an end to working-from-home, resulting in added pressure on the Government, as employer, legislator and regulator, to revise their use of economic restrictions (aka lockdowns) to manage the numbers of infections.

“I am not seeking to pass any edict.... I am a firm believer in the science and I would just want, in my capacity, to seek to persuade Comrades to do what they think is the right thing.”

**- Cde Mario Als
BIGWU President (Ag)**

The discussion on vaccination and return to the workplace in the public domain has degraded into arguments and ‘brow-beating’ of persons based on their individual pro-vaccine or ANTI-VAXXer stance, which if not managed can descend into a vaccine-apartheid scenario.

On a point of clarification, valid refusal by an individual on medical or religious grounds needs to be disaggregated from those who are vaccine-hesitant – [persons who delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccines as a result of lack of confidence, etc](#) - as robust education campaigns and

the use of moral persuasion can serve to allay fears and increase the voluntary uptake.

Some employers, given their business risk assessments, have already unilaterally implemented policies on vaccination in their workplace based on their understanding of the international and local resources and legislation, including the Occupational, Safety and Health (OSH) Act which speaks to the requirements of the employer and employee to maintain a safe working environment.

However, the President of the Industrial Court, Her Honor Deborah Thomas-Felix, has earlier gone on record to say, and rightly so, that [“unless Government establishes laws that would make the COVID-19 vaccine compulsory, organisations cannot demand that their workers take the vaccine.”](#) Since before this pandemic, she has been advocating for increased bi-lateral and tri-partite social dialogue between Government, Employers and Unions to arrive at workable solutions to assist workers.



Above: Persons lined up for vaccination at the Divali Nagar. **Source:** Trinidad Express

NEGOTIATIONS UPDATES

The following is a scan of some Branch Negotiations which are in progress at various branches of the Union:

PROPOSALS TO BE SUBMITTED

AGRICOLA CREDIT UNION: 01/01/2020 – 31/12/2022
FIRST CARIBBEAN INT'L BANK LTD: 2020 – 2023
FIRE SERVICES CREDIT UNION: 2018 – 2021
SFCCU CREDIT UNION: 2018 – 2020 & 2021 – 2023
TRINIDAD BUILDING AND LOAN ASSOC. 2016 – 2018
ICHRIS INDUSTRIES LTD: 01/01/2020 – 31/12/2022
SMITH ROBERTSON & CO. LTD: 01/01/2016 – 31/12/2020
SWMCOL: 29/07/2017 – 28/07/2020

IN PROGRESS

AGOSTINI INSURANCE BROKERS LTD: 2019 – 2021
Negotiations commenced in 2021 and despite the Union's proposed 15% increase, the employer has not moved from its initial 4% (2-1-1) offer.

NEAL & MASSY (N) CREDIT UNION: 2018 – 2020
No agreement on major cost items between parties with a breakdown looming.

REPUBLIC BANK (BU 1 & 2): 01/06/2020 – 31/05/2023
The Bank is firmly holding its 0% position and members are reminded of the domino effect these negotiations have on the sector.

T&T MORTGAGE FINANCE CO. LTD: 2020 – 2022
Proposals submitted and are awaiting response from the employer. In all likelihood, a breakdown in negotiations will be referred to the Ministry of Labour and thereafter to the Industrial Court based on the experience of negotiations in other State Sector companies.

SETTLED

TRU VALU SUPERMARKET LTD (T/A Dollar Valu) (Weekly Paid): 01/07/2014 – 30/06/2016
Last collective agreement signed in 2016 with a 12% increase in wages. However, this only amounts to an increase of \$2.43 per hour. COLA was revised to \$120.00 per week.

FIRE SERVICES ASSOCIATION: 01/01/2016 – 31/12/2020
A five-year agreement was signed off by parties with a 20% increase in wages for workers.

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO UNIFIED TEACHERS ASSOCIATION (TTUTA) BU 1: 2014 – 2016 & 2017 – 2019
Both periods settled and signed off in March 2021 with lumpsums and percentage increases in the final year of the period. Increased subsistence of \$55.00 with revised COLA of \$225.00 in final year. Effective January 2019, workers called out while on vacation will now be paid double time rates, as well as increases in uniform allowance.

TRINIDAD EXPRESS NEWSPAPERS LTD: 2016 – 2018

After conciliation at the Court, a settlement of 6% was reached with revised COLA of \$175.00 awarded.

REPORTED TO MINISTRY OF LABOUR

VENTURE CREDIT UNION: 2019 – 2021

Proposals submitted in 2019 but changes in Management and Industrial Relations Consultants have caused further delays. Since December 2020 three bilateral sessions have been held and the momentum is promising towards a settlement without the intervention, as previously reported, by the Ministry of Labour.

EXPORT CENTRES CO. LTD: 2013 – 2015

Breakdown reported to Ministry, and awaiting their intervention. In 2017, this Union received RMU status for hourly-rated/fortnightly paid workers and is seeking to align their terms and conditions with the established bargaining unit.

REPORTED TO INDUSTRIAL COURT

CENTRAL BANK OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: 2018 – 2020
Breakdown in negotiations was before the Industrial Court.

EASTERN COMMERCIAL LANDS LTD (T/A TRU VALU LTD) (BU 4 - SUPERVISORS): 01/06/2020 – 31/05/2023
Matter is scheduled for hearing in January 2022.

CIPRIANI COLLEGE OF LABOUR & COOPERATIVE STUDIES: 2011 – 2019

Negotiations for three (3) outstanding periods are before the Court for their determination.

CCN TV6: 01/01/2017 – 31/12/2019

The breakdown in negotiations were reported to the Industrial Court for conciliation.

DAILY NEWS LIMITED: 01/06/2015 – 31/05/2018

Conciliation at the Industrial Court, arising from a breakdown in negotiations, is scheduled for August 2021.

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY: 2013 – 2015

A 2020 Court judgement awarded workers a 6% increase in wages, however, workers have not yet been paid retroactive payments.

SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION 01/10/2014 – 30/09/2017

A breakdown in negotiations is currently before the Industrial Court. The Union has suggested to the employer's consultant an approach of either concluding a five (5) year Collective Agreement ending 30/09/19, or conversely seek to conclude two successive three (3) year CA's and which suggestions we are advised are being considered.

Keeping our Branch Networks Alive

Branches are the heart of the union’s democracy, and as active branch members we know that by having regular meetings between the branch executive and branch membership serves as a catalyst for creating better workplaces. However, with all the restrictions on gathering and changes to the ways in which we usually interact with each other on a personal and organisational level, it is easy for some of these functions to be disregarded owing to the pandemic.

Notwithstanding this adversity, the Republic Bank Branch of the Union conducted their first ever Branch General Meeting virtually on July 7, 2021. This meeting featured Cdes Mario Als, Trevor

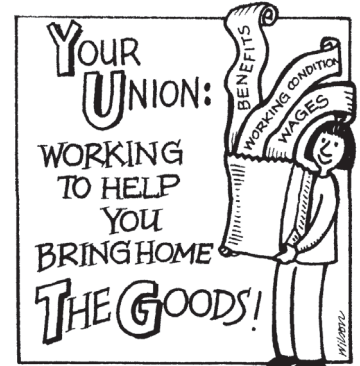
“Branches are the bedrock of the union: without them there would be no union to support members at work and negotiate for a better deal.

- UNISON (UK Based Trade Union)

Johnson and Jason Brown of the BIGWU Central Executive and was chaired by re-elected RBL Branch President, Cde Jason Thomas, as well as the other members of the RBL Branch Executive. The meeting, starting at 6:30pm, lasted for almost two (2) hours and saw the speakers addressing various solidarity and branch issues, and disseminating much needed updates and answering member questions.

High on the agenda was the current state of ongoing negotiations for the period 2020-2023, as the Bank’s zero percent (0%) offer has not shown any movement since beginning discussions. Cde Jason Brown advised members that **“this meeting was merely an initiation towards beginning discussions on matters facing members at the RBL branch, to inform members and encourage informed decisions about how workers act on securing and assisting each other in bettering the terms and conditions and their working life at the bank.”**

Before the meeting concluded, Cde Mario Als commended the RBL Branch Executive on this initiative to facilitate communication. He went on to say that “...there is a deficit (of meetings) in several branches of the Union. We do not engage in regular and effective communication... and emphasize that I believe we need more of this (in other branches) to strengthen the fabric of the branches.” In closing he reminded the more than two hundred (200) members in attendance that **“there is a collective genius from the rank and file of the Union,** and we need to solicit their input to ensure that we get the benefits for the workers and make the workplace a better place for all.”



Organising the Unorganised: Unit Trust Corporation (UTC) Campaign



Trade unions exist because we can achieve more together than we can alone. When workers band together, they’re much more likely to get decent wages and be treated well at work.

Being a union member and having your employer recognise your union, provides you with far more formal and informal ways to resolve disputes or to deal with problems at work. However, being a member of a union even if your workplace doesn’t have a recognised majority union, means that you will still be able to get advice from your union, and a Union officer to accompany you to meetings with management. And if your co-workers are also joining a union, you might be able to start the process of getting recognised.

At left: BIGWU Comrades Sanatan and Ottley sharing Union Literature to Unit Trust Workers on their way to work.

Labour Day 2021



At Left: Collage of previous Labour Day celebrations in Fyzabad.

This year, as the Trade Union Movement and the country celebrated the 84th Anniversary of the 1937 "Butler Oilfield Riots", Labour Day 2021 celebrations took place under a more sombre tone. Coupled with the spike in COVID-19 infections and double-digit deaths, the Government's declaration of a three (3) month long State of Emergency from May 15, along with variable time curfews meant to restrict gatherings and the flow of persons, served to restrict the attendance of Trade Union members and their leaders from making the annual walk from Avocat to Charlie King Junction, Fyzabad.

This was the second year that the usual commemorative activities which recognises the contributions of Tubal Uriah "Buzz" Butler, Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani, Adrian Cola Rienzi, Elma Francois and other local labour leaders in the history of the Modern Trade Union Movement, had to be restricted in light of public health concerns. In 2020 the 'symbolic' march was made only by the various Trade Union Leaders, however, this year the almost 3 kilometer stretch of roadway which is normally flanked by crowds of workers was noticeably clear to pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

In keeping Labour Day traditions alive, representatives from the Labour Federations visited the Fyzabad cemetery to lay wreaths at the tomb of Cde Butler, thereafter dispersing to their various homes before the 10am curfew. With no stage or gathering of workers, the 2021 Labour Day address by the President of the Joint Trade Union Movement (JTUM), Cde Ancel Roget, was pre-recorded the day before from the balcony of the OWTU building overlooking the Charlie King Junction where it all began in 1937.

Cde Roget's address, was delivered under the theme of the Joint Trade Union Federation's campaign of "UNITE TO FIGHT" wherein all three federations: the National Trade Union Centre (NATUC); the Federation of Independent Trade Unions and NGOs (FITUN) and the Joint Trade Union Movement (JTUM) and along with giving an overview of the state of the labour sector, he publicly recognised and commended "the essential" workers of Trinidad and Tobago, and the World, who have kept the World going during this pandemic.

Speaking on the Trinidad and Tobago economy, Cde Roget highlighted the fact that the Trinidad and Tobago economy was in a crisis long before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, as

“...whilst people are struggling to maintain their family and pay their monthly installments, loans and mortgages these banks are still declaring enormous profits in the hundreds of millions of dollars.”

- JTUM President Cde Ancel Roget

well as the Government’s neo-liberal policies that continue to be bane of the population and ultimately brings added hardships on the working man. These neo-liberal decisions supercede the blatant disrespect of the Government to Trade Unions as it pertains to their stance on long overdue collective bargaining with the respective organisations, but is seen in the planned liberalisation of fuel prices by the removal of the fixed pricing, planned privatisation of the Court, planned restructuring/reorganisation at state enterprises inclusive of WASA and T&TEC, as well as proposed price hikes for electricity and water rates.

The decision by Trade Unions to depart from the National Tripartite Advisory Council (NTAC) was also a conversation point of his speech, as despite the benefits of engaging in the process of social dialogue being critically important for the achievement of industrial peace and stability; economic growth and development; labour productivity, competitiveness and social order, this amalgam of Government, Business and Trade Unions has not seen the development of a single policy perspective to effect significant impact on the economic progress of the Country.

As stated by Cde Roget, “...regardless of how the government ministers try to spin it or criticize us for leaving, ...the trade union movement could not simply continue to sit in a process, where it was only ordinary working people and the poor carrying this massive burden of economic adjustment.”

Not forgetting BIGWU and our individual IR concerns, Cde Roget singled out a situation which exists at one of the branches of the Union, where despite mid-year profits being to the tune of \$687 million (26% higher than in the last financial year) and having all staff operations continuing almost uninterrupted throughout the entire pandemic, they have sought to present a zero percent (0%) increase for current wage negotiations. This is a classic case of whilst people are struggling to maintain their family and pay their monthly installments, loans and mortgages these banks are still declaring enormous profits in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Though not ending with the usual cultural show, Cde Roget’s presentation ended with quoting US President, Joseph Biden, on the need for Trade Unions to increase benefits for workers, and redoubled the commitment to seeking advancement for workers now, and for future generations.



FILMSTRIP (above): Clips from Labour Day Video Presentations
BELOW: JTUM President - Ancel Roget, delivering the Labour Day Address from the balcony of the OWTU Building overlooking Charlie King Junction, Fyzabad





BIGWU Hamper DRIVE

100 Hampers Distributed

With increased COVID-19 restrictions closing more businesses and sectors of the economy, a greater number of persons were placed in positions where they were unable to provide the basic foodstuff for themselves and their family.

Given this concern of persons being unable to have a healthy meal during the period of LOCKDOWN, the Union engaged in another round of its Food Hamper Drive to render some much needed assistance. These food hamper donations were focused towards three main categories of persons:

- Members who would have lost their jobs
- Needy persons in the community
- Charitable organisations

This drive was coordinated by **BIGWU Deputy General Secretary, Cde Sharsa Alfonso-David**, and also partnership with the Joint Trade Union Movement (JTUM) in preparing one hundred (100) Food Hampers for distribution.

We also extend our thanks to Tru Valu and JTA Supermarkets for their assistance with preparing and delivering the hampers, which have been distributed to the individuals/families over the past 4 weeks.



BIGWU'S ADOPT -A- SCHOOL RAFFLE

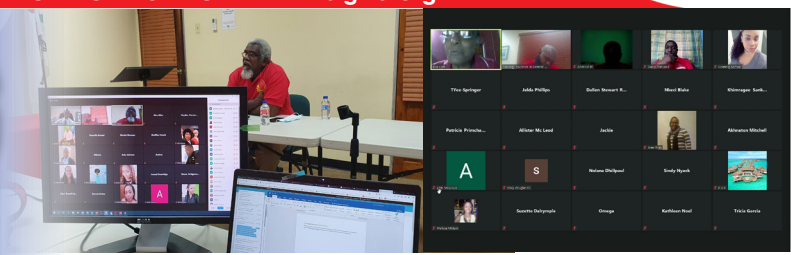
This raffle was hosted by BIGWU to raise funds to purchase electronic learning devices for students in rural communities accessing online classes/learning during this COVID-19 pandemic. BIGWU would like to thank all members and sponsors for the overwhelming support in raffle sales and donations of tablets and tokens towards ensuring this charitable venture was successful.

WINNER'S	SMALL TO MEDIUM	LARGE TO MEGA
1st PRIZE \$10,000	Trinidad & Tobago Postal Workers Union	Kathleen Babb First Citizens - Montrose
2nd PRIZE \$7,000	Joyce Warrick Smith Robertson & Company	Elton Charles First Citizens - Canaan
3rd PRIZE \$5,000	Vivian Joseph Environmental M'gmt Auth.	Calysha Ovide First Citizens - Maraval Rd

SELLER'S PRIZES	SMALL TO MEDIUM	LARGE TO MEGA
1st PRIZE TruValu Vouchers	Christine Hinkson Smith Robertson & Company	Shirella Didier First Citizens - West Mall
2nd PRIZE \$ Valu Vouchers	Patricia Rampersad First Caribbean Int'l Bank	Javier Camacho Republic Bank - Ind. Sq.
3rd PRIZE Pennywise Vouchers	Vivian Joseph Environmental M'gmt Auth.	Paula Salvary Central Bank of T&T



TRAINING IN A PANDEMIC



Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, BIGWU has always recognized the importance of education and training for members as part of providing service to its members. Despite having to move to being hosted virtually, our annual education programme continues to support our branch officials, activists and members through the various concepts of Trade Unionism and other aspects of their workplace rights and responsibilities.

Given the steep learning curve for adopting this medium for instruction, we utilise all available tools to maintain members' attention and focus for session's duration. These include structuring Kahoot! quizzes and other games to reinforce topics covered. So far these Kahoots! have been a hit and encourage good rivalry, as players want to see their name at that winners podium.

fixture to engage in blended learning to make the best use of members' time, as well giving the best possible experience.

Under the theme of "Building capacity of Branches / Strengthening Institutions of BIGWU", of the six (6) sessions planned, there are three (3) more remaining; the History of BIGWU and the Trade Union Movement; Occupational Safety and Health for the Workplace; and the Organising model and Labour Legislation. Branches who wish to register persons for any of these upcoming sessions can do so via sending the names to union@bigwu.org or making contact with the Union's Education Officer - Cde Jean-Paul Bethelmy.



Above: Some Tobago-based members of the Union listening attentively to question being posed to them by Cde Alva Allen in a training session in 2018.

While hoping that a return to face-to-face interactions would assist in making the exchange of knowledge a bit easier, as we are unsure how long these restrictions will remain with us. Notwithstanding this, we are making the best of the virtual platforms while seeking to understand how this can be a permanent



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2021 EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Upcoming Sessions

SEPTEMBER 15-16, 2021
History of BIGWU; History of the Trade Union Movement

OCTOBER 13-14, 2021
An overview of OSHA; Role of the Joint Safety Committees; HIV/AIDS and other safety issues at the workplace; Integrating Health and Safety into the Organising Model

NOVEMBER 9-10, 2021
The Organising Model of Trade Unionism; Labour Legislation; The Workers' Agenda

CONTACT US AT
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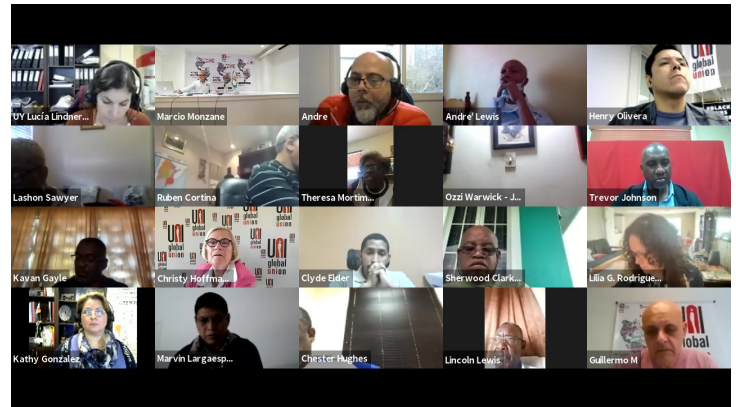
REGIONAL & INTERNATIONAL NEWS

MEETING OF UNI AMERICAS - CARIBBEAN REGION - JULY 7, 2021

Unable to meet physically, UNI Affiliates of the Caribbean Region held a virtual meeting on July 7, 2021. This meeting allowed for Union representatives to give a clear picture of the employment situation of the Caribbean financial system and outline problems being faced in each of the islands.

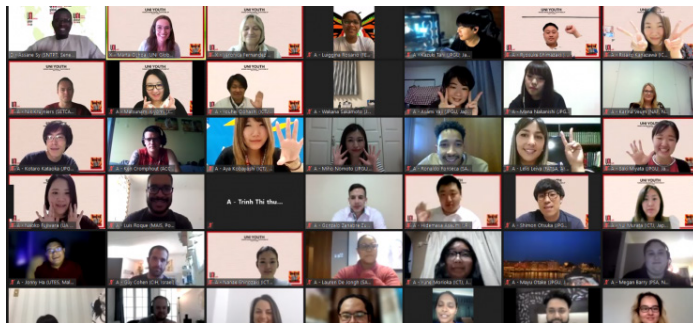
Apart from the challenges of COVID-19, representatives highlighted the current situation with regards to the loss of jobs and the violation of labor conditions in the Caribbean. Cde Theresa Mortimer, President of UNI Americas Women, also gave an update from UNI Americas Women, as well as contributions were made by Ruben Cortina, President of UNI Global and Christy Hoffman, General Secretary.

The meeting was led by the Vice President - UNI Americas and BIGWU General Secretary, Cde. Trevor Johnson, and by the Regional Secretary, Marcio Monzane. The participants were from ABWU - Antigua & Barbuda Workers Union, BFSU



- Bahamas Financial Services Union, BITU - Bustamante Industrial Trade Union of Jamaica, GTAWU - Grenada Technical and Allied Workers Union, CCWU - Clerical and Commercial Workers' Union of Guyana, NWU - National Workers Union of Saint Lucia, and the Postal Workers and Communication Workers Unions of Trinidad and Tobago.

UNI YOUTH RISING UP TOGETHER TO BUILD STRONGER UNIONS



On June 4, 2021, over 600 young trade union activists from all over the world united to build strong unions at the UNI Youth World Forum.

"Young people identify with trade union values, but it is difficult sometimes to find our place in union structures," said Jyoti Shrestha from UNI NLC Nepal.

Director of UNI Youth Marta Ochoa urged young activists to raise their voices in their workplaces and unions to help build a stronger labour movement.

Take a look back at the discussion on Twitter following the hashtag [#YouthRiseUp](#).

ITF CALLS FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION TO SAVE JOBS, TACKLE RISING POVERTY AND TO LEAD ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN THE CARIBBEAN



Unions affiliated to the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) from across the Caribbean held a virtual summit on June 02 to raise awareness of the ongoing impact

of COVID-19 on jobs and communities in the region.

The ITF and its 18 affiliated unions are calling on governments and employers to cooperate with trade unions to develop and implement a regional recovery plan that: Prioritises employment security, Guarantees free universal access to vaccines and re-establishes safe travel corridors. Globally the tourism industry accounts for over 300 million jobs.

ITF General Secretary, Stephen Cotton said: "The Caribbean is too important to ignore, and we have a duty to protect the infrastructure and livelihoods of workers who make visiting so appealing to millions of tourists each year."

ITF Tourism Chair, David Massiah added: "My concern is that women and young workers are bearing a disproportionate number of job losses. However, ITF Regional Secretary, Edgar Diaz stressed that workers not feel forced to have the vaccination, reiterating that education and engagement is key in encouraging their participation.