

# The Decline of Jamaica's Trade Union Movement in the Era of Capitalist Globalization

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*Jamaica's development project was largely influenced by Western expansionism and colonialism. Colonialism was predicated on the demand for extraction of resources and forced labour of African slaves in order to market the industrial products of metropolitan countries (McMichael, 2004 and Girvan, 2012). As a result of promoting private enterprise, enormous commercial profits have been generated from large scale plantation slavery during the 17th century in the English speaking Caribbean (Micholakov, 2009).*

*Other scholars have debated that the distinguishing feature of the plantation economy in the Caribbean was its dependence on staple production such as the sugar crop. In order to ensure economic efficiency and productivity of the estate, large numbers of labourers were required (Best, Levitt and Girvan, 2009, p.13). Prior to this postulation, Saint Lucian economist, Lewis (1954) in his seminal piece, 'Economic Development and the Unlimited Supplies of Labour' asserted that the demand for labour in countries of South can be attributed to the fact that developing countries had a relatively large population and there was a limited supply of labour in Western, industrialized countries.*

The unlimited supplies of labour in the context of colonial Jamaica worked in the interests of the Western imperialists because unlimited supplies of labour would allow them to keep wages low while increasing their profits (Levitt, 2005). This has a negative impact on the working classes because there is no investment in their skills and knowledge and consequently, their standard of living has not improved significantly (Lewis, 1954).

Lewis' scholarly contribution represents a radical departure from classical economists who have studied problems of capital accumulation and growth only in the Western, capitalist economies (Rhys, 1991). His knowledge also incorporated a historical approach to development. A historical approach to development analyzes the systemic connections between the First World and Third World and ways in which these relations result in not only underdevelopment of the Third World but also a lack of privileges and rights for workers in Third World countries ( Rhys, 1991, Munck 2002, McMichael and 2004).

The legacies of the plantation economy have been deeply embedded in the social and economic of Jamaican society. This is evident in the rigid social class and racial hierarchies in which the ownership of the means and modes of production have been controlled by a white minority with the support of the brown, middle class professionals. The majority was the black, working classes who were poor and had no access to property (Daniel, 1957 and Phillips, 1988). Although slavery was fully abolished in 1838, many workers were still actively engaged in sugar estate labour because colonial administrators were concerned about the profitability of the industry (Easton, 1962). The workers on these sugar estates

were susceptible to deplorable working conditions and low wages. The low wages were not sufficient to take care of family needs and hence, they turned to subsistence production. Workers in Caribbean societies were never fully-proletarianized because of their marginal production and semi-proletarianization is a direct consequence of the plantation economy legacy (Frucht, 1967).

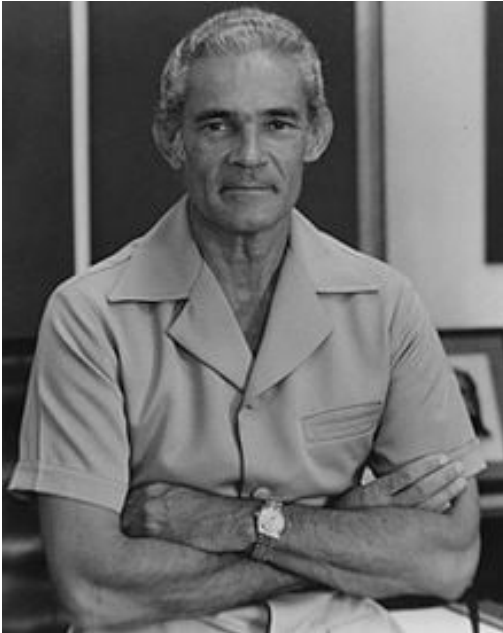
The emergence of the labour rebellions in the 1930s was set against the background that Jamaica's affluence was built on cheap labour. There was also a growing consciousness of unmet promises among the black, working class population have allowed them to challenge the structures of exploitation through active forms of resistance such as strikes, mob action and property damage (Phelps, 1960 and Collin, 2014). Historians such as Casimir (1992) and Conway (1997) have pointed out the 1930s Great Depression has had ripple effects on the Jamaican economy where mass unemployment, depressed wages, no social security protection and poor infrastructure have forced them to demand better working conditions and wages through protest. From a Marxist perspective, one can argue that workers in 1930s Jamaica had organized against capitalist exploitation because they are active agents in creating their own group solidarity and consciousness along common class lines (Cohen, 1991, p.83).

The working class struggle of black Jamaicans was also situated within an anti-colonial environment where they recognized that although, a law was passed by the Legislative Council to officially recognize trade unions in 1919, it did not stipulate or recognize the right to strike and the right to collective bargaining (Eaton, 1962, Nettleford, 1970 and Corbin, 2015). The largest and main trade unions are the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) and the National Workers Unions (NWU). They emerged out of these island-wide labour riots to champion for rights that workers have been agitating for. These trade unions are closely affiliated with Jamaica's two major political parties, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP) and their respective founders, Sir Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley (Dunkley, 2011). Among the significant victories from the labour rebellions was the introduction of the first Minimum Wage Act, a Holiday with Pay law and special provisions to regulate working hours of workers (Bustamante Industrial Trade Union of Jamaica, 2019).

These were significant gains for Jamaica's black working classes but the most influential victory of the trade union movement was its advocacy for Universal Adult Suffrage in 1944. This gave all Jamaicans ages 21 and over the right to vote (Nettleford, 2009). The right to vote is interpreted as an important victory for the trade union movement and the nation because democracy is the core existence of unions and unions are an instrumental force in defending democracy (Loreto, 2013, p.75). Universal Adult Suffrage was also an essential precursor to achieving a path of self-government in 1962 (Biddle and Stephens, 1989).

### **Manley's Attempt to Create A Social Compact**

In the post-independence era, Jamaica attained positive macro-economic indicators of development wherein its economic growth rate was between two per cent (2%) to (8%) from 1960-1973. This was due to the boom in the country's bauxite industry and the injection of foreign direct investment from the North-American multi-national corporations (Downes, 2003). Amidst the promising macro-economic indicators of development, there were high levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality among majority of its citizens (Kamugisha, 2013).



**Prime Minister Michael Manley** was elected on the People's National Party (PNP) democratic socialist platform in 1972 to advance the interests of poor and dispossessed Jamaicans through state regulation of the economy in order to reduce social inequities (Mars and Young, 2004). Social compact refers to gains in productivity resulting from a Fordist organizing principle to increase financial investments from profits as well as the purchasing power of labour (Ramasamy, 2005, p.8).

Manley did not actually achieve the social compact given the nature of Jamaica's political system. His political philosophy and his social policies, however represented an effort to strengthen the role of trade unions in politics, protect the rights workers and to promote capital. Prior to a career in representational politics, Manley had developed his skills in communication and negotiation through organizing workers in the sugar and bauxite industry for better wages, better working conditions and most importantly, greater social dialogue between workers and their employers. His most outstanding achievement was organizing a successful workers' strike at Jamaica Broadcasting Commission (JBC) against unfair dismissal of workers by management (Gray, 1991).

His commitment to strengthening the labour movement was evident in his political philosophy that in order to raise the standards of the population, government needed to invest more in skills upgrading, better access to education, technology and infrastructure (Hague and Fletcher, 2002). This is political philosophy is similar to recommendations that were made by Lewis (1954) in relation to labour's role in the economic development of a developing country. One can also argue that underpinning this political philosophy is a structuralist view on the labour-development nexus. Structural and dependency scholars believe that organized labour should play an active role in politics and that state intervention can provide greater access to social services for the population (Green, 2008).

The government expenditure towards health care, education, housing and poverty alleviation for Jamaicans was at an average of thirty-two per cent (32%) from 1972-1976 (Boyd, 1986). Manley's engagement with trade unions, particularly the National Workers Union (NWU) in the political process has led to the enactment of numerous labour laws such as the 1974 Employment Act, the 1975 Labour Relations and Disputes Act, the 1975 Equal Pay for Women Act and the 1979 Maternity Leave With Pay Law (Trade Unions of Jamaica, 2019). In addition to this, he encouraged the establishment of worker co-operatives and affording housing options through National Housing Trust to poor workers (Bogues, 2002).

Despite Manley's remarkable track record of strengthening worker organization, he has been fiercely criticized for maintaining the flawed system of political unionism which suppressed any form of radical consciousness among workers. For example, he played a key role in expelling Leninist-Marxist activist, Stuart Hall from the union movement because he wanted to create a union that was independent of Jamaica's two political parties. Furthermore, one of the motivations behind Manley's entry into trade union activism was the fact that in order for the People's National Party (PNP) to gain state power, it needed greater support from the National Workers Union (NWU).

The Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) enjoyed its support from the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union which had dominated the island (Bogues, 2002 and Meeks, 2016). Other criticisms geared towards the Manley regime in Jamaica were the fact that there was no political compatibility between his democratic socialist philosophy and the British Westminster model of government. The British Westminster model is characterized by short electoral cycles and therefore, his objective to reduce social inequities through greater state intervention was both constrained and unsustainable (Levitt, 2005).

The attempt to create a social compact was eventually crumbled by external issues such as shocks to the domestic economy from the 1973 OPEC oil crisis as well as USA interventionism because of Manley's anti-capitalist stance on development (Mars and Young, 2004). As a result of exorbitant inflation (26.9%) and debt levels, Jamaica entered its first agreement with the International Monetary Fund in 1977 (Bernal, 1984).

Manley was pressured to accept US \$74 million in credit to cut back on its social programs and to de-value the Jamaican currency by forty per cent (40%) (Conway, 1997, p.8). Subsequently, he lost the 1980 General election and he was replaced by Edward Seaga from the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) who encouraged free market policies to stimulate export-oriented development and foreign direct investment (Harrigan, 1998 and Kamugisha, 2013). The results of the 1980 General election in Jamaica did not only represent a change in development models but also a shift in the ideological approaches to development (Thoburn and Morris, 2007). The shift in ideological approaches to development has had a severe impact on the freedoms that were won by Jamaica's trade union movement and its working class.

"The effects of globalization and external conditionalities are a threat to the trade union movement. The splurge of trade union shut outs in free trade zones is beyond alarming. The quality of workers lives will be gravely affected if trade unions are weak"- The Jamaica Gleaner, 2018

Capitalist globalization has been a destructive force to the rights of workers in Jamaica. Cutback in spending on social programs is evident in the fact that despite Jamaica's goal to achieve universal social protection, the country has one of the lowest social protection coverage in Latin America and the Caribbean. Less than twelve (12%) of its estimated population (2.8 million) has access to social security protection since 2004 (Lavigne and Vargas, 2013). The global restructuring process since 1980 and the 2008 Global Economic Crisis have eroded a permanent supply of jobs and as a result, there are growing cases of precarious and low waged forms of labour in the informal sector (Standing, 2011 and ILO, 2012). Approximately seventy per cent (70%) of Jamaicans are in the informal sector and this is not recorded in the official employment statistics of the island. The task to effectively organize workers in these sectors are even more tumultuous for the trade unions because

these workers do not any standard access to representation security, social security, income security and job security (Standing, 2015 and ILO, 2017).

Furthermore, the trade union movement is unable to effectively garner a radical political agenda on behalf of the working class because of the limitations associated with 'political unionism' and internal antagonisms such as gender-divide, the age-divide and the emergence of technology in the work place. A case example of this central argument can be drawn from a discussion during the 2007 General Election in which the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) had promised to return to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reduce the nation's balance of debt payment problems. Among the proposed conditionalities were public sector transformation and wage free for public sector workers. The position of the National Workers Union (NWU) was that the proposed path of development would be harmful to workers.

On the other hand, the representative of Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) which is aligned to the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) only accused the representative of the National Workers Union (NWU) for selling himself short for political purposes (Jamaican Forum, 2007). This example illustrates that both union representatives have not offered any viable alternatives to the decision that has been proposed. The limitations of political unionism is seen where the infiltration of the ideologies of the patron political party can co-opt organized labour (Edie, 1984 and Stephens and Stephens, 1987). The decline of the trade union movement in Jamaica is also linked to internal challenges such as failure to identify appropriate strategies for a globalized world context, lack of interest on the part of younger members and women because of the age and gender politics that dominates the structure of the union movement. Additionally, there is limited labour education afforded to workers from less privileged backgrounds (Marsh, Phillips and Wedderburn 2014 and Marsh and Roberts, 2016).

### **Organizing in New Forms of Work - Women Workers in Jamaica's Free Trade Zones**

Free trade zones (FTZs) or export processing zones (EPZs), are instruments of export-oriented industrialization became prominent strategies of development for Third World countries to promote exports, industrialization and growth since the 1960s (Munck, 2002 and McMichael, 2004). Free trade zones (FTZs) or export processing zones (EPZs) are industrial zones with special incentives to promote foreign investment. Materials undergo processing before they are re-exported (ILO, 2019). The nature and scope of free trade zones have evolved immensely and as a result, they specialize in business outsourcing and information technology (OECD, 2007). Jamaica established its first free trade zone, the Kingston Free Trade Zone in 1976 (OECD, 2007). Free trades zones in Jamaica, however, have become more popular since the 1980s because rapid export-oriented industrialization was a component of the nation's structural adjustment obligations with the International Monetary Fund (Klak, 1996). Free trade zones have attracted thousands of employment opportunities and increased the generation of foreign direct investment from 1980-2000 in Jamaica (Steven, 1990 and Craigwell, 2006).

Majority (90%) of the workers in Jamaica's traditional free trade zones are women and they are preferable to employers because of their perceived limited skills, limited education and submissiveness to authority (Elson and Pearson, 1981, Hernandez-Kelly, 1983, Mies, 1986, Milberg and Amengual, 2008 and Gunawardana, 2014). The emergence of free trade zones in developing countries like Jamaica reinforces the strengths of the New International

Division of Labour (NIDL) thesis that was conceptualized by German scholars Froebel et. al (1980). They posited that the shift of manufacturing industries from the First World to the Third World would directly result into the “gendering of work” in the Global South (Munck, 2002). The “gendering of work” in free trade zones becomes problematic because regardless of the changes in the type of work in free trade zones, Jamaica’s model of development is largely defined by attraction of foreign capital through special incentives and an obsession with growth statistics (Panitch et al. 2004, Ghai, 2011 and Maruscke, 2017).

A pertinent problem associated with free trade zones is the fact that workers are subjected to low wages, long working hours, poor working conditions and a lack of freedom of association (Dunn, 2001 and Russell-Brown, 2003 and Carr and Chen, 2004). Trade unions in Jamaica, as agents of collective bargaining have been experiencing serious challenges to organize workers in new forms of work because there is a global decline of freedom of association. Foreign controlled companies have established their own worker councils to manage grievances between employers and employees but these councils lack voice mechanisms to negotiate on issues of better wages, improved working conditions and specific hours (Balz et al, 2010).

Freedom of association is prohibited in free trade zones because organized labour is seen as an inhibitor to the competitiveness and profitability of free trade zones and therefore, countries with weak trade unions are more attractive to foreign investors (Bacchus, 2005). It can be posited that there is not necessarily a weakened state under capitalist globalization but the state’s primary economic imperative is to be a greater facilitator of capital in order to stimulate growth (McMicheal, 2004 and Gray, 2008).

Limited or no trade union representation in Jamaica’s free trade zones have been highlighted in several case studies where owners of the zones have not only threatened to permanent black list women workers who organize through the help of trade unions. They have also been threatened to shift the zones to other countries that are investor friendly (Bolles, 1991, Dunn, 1994, Mullings, 1999 and Russell-Brown, 2003 and Harley, 2007). Other scholars have argued that trade unions cannot do much in terms of representing workers in free trade zones because trade unions become a mirror of the constrained context in which they are placed to operate. In addition, the physical demarcation and the entry permit requirements of free trade zones are major obstacles for trade unions to reach and organize women workers (Jauch, 2002 and Prieto and Quinteros, 2004).

The rights of women workers are at a greater risk because of the lack of trade union representation in free trade zones. Several reports have indicated that women workers in free trade zones have been forced to work over time without compensation. Women workers have also been affected by major health problems such as gastro-intestinal illnesses, headaches and dizziness. There are also cases of discrimination towards women workers who are pregnant. These workers do not receive maternity leave with pay and released immediately because they are considered as “natural wastage” to the company’s productivity (Safa, 1981, Prieto, 1997, Bailey and Ricketts, 2003, Barnes and Kazar, 2008, ICFTU, 2004 and ITUC, 2011). This is not only a blatant exploitation of worker’s rights but these actions illustrate that there is a disregard for national labour laws such as the 1979 Maternity Leave With Pay Act that was a landmark victory for the trade union movement and the working class, particularly women.

There is no other government administration after Manley that promoted and respected the

rights of the poor and labouring class in Jamaica (Taylor, 2017). This is because for most of Jamaica's development history, when respective political parties form government they all pursue a path of capitalist, neo-liberal development (Cumper, 1974, Biddle and Stephens, 1989 and Girvan, 2015).

The decline of a once vibrant trade union movement and its ability to articulate a radical political agenda on behalf of workers is further compromised by the repressive nature of the state towards organized labour through policy actions. Recently, the Ministry of Education has introduced a "muzzle plan" to silence political activism among teachers (Jamaica Observer, 2019). While there has been a follow-up response by pockets of union members of the Jamaica Teacher's Association and other interest groups to challenge the policy's infringement on worker's and constitutional rights, there has not been any active form of collective resistance towards this policy. The consequence of capitalist globalization is the repressive nature of state towards organized labour which ultimately results in the depoliticization of the trade union movement (Webber, 2015 and Osazrow, 2017). The breaches to workers' rights and limited trade union representation are not only restricted to countries with authoritarian regimes. Countries with a wide range of democratic freedoms also experience serious infringements to workers' rights because the pursuit of development is constructed on exploitation of cheap labour (Gray, 2008 and Balz et al, 2010 and Rai and Benjamin, 2018).

### **Future Speculations?**

Based on the current changes in the global economy and its impact on the situation of work in Jamaica along with the repressive nature of the state and other institutions towards organized labour, it can be predicted that the current state of decline in the trade union movement will persist.

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