President General Ancel Roget’s 2009 Labour Day Message:
Time to Rescue T&T!!

Charlie King Junction, Fyzabad
June 19th, 2009

Trinidad and Tobago is in crisis. It is a crisis that runs deep within every family and every community. We need not look far but only to read the papers, talk to friends and family or even strangers in a taxi.

In other words the crisis is not isolated but can be felt by all citizens. We feel it when our children get sick and we have to take them for medical care. We feel it when our employer threatens to cut our jobs and pay.

We feel it every time we go to the groceries and the bills keep rising. We feel it when there are no concrete answers around corrupt practices by government officials. We feel it when we cannot even appoint seven people to an integrity commission.

We feel it every time a life is lost to violence. We have certainly been feeling it in the last few days, as we watch the painful pictures on television as parents feel the loss of their children.

It must be made clear that there is a direct attack on workers by employers, including the state as the largest employer. The state is setting an example of how to deal with workers, therefore leading the charge against hard working men and women.

Employers can hide behind the lead of the state and can even expect the state to protect them and their interest.

The combination of state, private corporations & employer organizations such as the Employers’ Consultative Association (ECA) and Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturer’s Association (TTMA) means that workers are left with one line of defense, the Trade Unions.

This defense has not only hold the line but made real advances winning so many glorious battles since 1937.

Let us make it clear, on this 2009 Labour Day we will continue to proudly hold that defense. We will not move one inch back. They will never take the hill we have won. We rose up in 1937 and we are prepared to rise up again!!

The battle over workers’ lives will intensify in the coming months as the state policies and practices will become more and more anti-worker. But as they become more and more anti-worker we will become more and more pro-worker.

We have a government that has decided to declare an all out war on workers and the working class.
The idea that a worker needs to be protected from exploitation and being taking advantage of means nothing the Manning Government. So we not only defending, we attacking with full force and none shall be spared.

What message can the OWTU give this 2009 Labour Day? Certainly, it has to be that we will not allow the Manning Government to continue to treat the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago with disrespect and disregard. Their true contempt for the poor and the working class reveals itself every day.

The Trinidad and Tobago which exists in the mind of Prime Minister Patrick Manning is a complete disconnect from the reality faced by the vast majority of citizens in Trinidad and Tobago.

With all the revenue that have been derived over the last five years it is still not possible to hide the failure of the economic and development model, which the Manning Government seem so hell bent on pursuing.

This model has brought no end to the grave inequality that exists, nor has it alleviated the pain and suffering of ordinary people, but it has lined the pockets of government officials, their friends, and the ruling class.

Over the last 5 years this country has earned approximately $404 Billion, put another way that is Four Hundred Thousand Million Dollars in revenue. That means that of the 1.3 million citizens in Trinidad and Tobago, over the last 5 years, every one of us could have received $311,000 for our own development.

But what do we have to show for it other than sky scrapers that has become Port of Spain new sky line? Oh Yes! a completed Prime Ministerial palace in the appropriately named street “La Fantasie”.

You see, we have a government that has no regards for safety, peace and security; a government that has no regards for job security and the right to work; a government that has no regards for trade union rights; a government that has no regards for the right to decent pensions for retired persons; a government that has no regards for proper health care and quality education; a government that has no regards for affordable food, or for our farmers to earn a decent living; a government that has no regards to the right to freedom of expression and the right to protest.

We are currently operating under a prime ministerial dictatorship. In short, this means that the Prime Minister is governing the country without any accountability to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Remember, he has made it clear to all that his government is free to pursue “its” agenda regardless of what the people need or say.

The manner in which a person exercises their duty as a leader of a country determines the true nature of their tendency. Prime Minister Patrick Manning has clearly shown his dictatorial tendency.
We cannot forget the treatment meted out to members of his own cabinet, if they are not prepared to follow his distorted ideas of development, he dismisses them as he pleases. Ask Bridgid Annisette-George. And then he would use people to do his dirty work against any body who oppose him. This is the reason he brought back John Jeremie.

The questions must be, who does he want to go after now? The Labour movement perhaps; who does he want to protect? Calder Hart and Karen Nunez-Tesheira perhaps!

As the Patrick Manning’s government pursues “its” agenda, everyday our young men, women and children are dying. After spending millions of dollars on another crime plan, the murder rate is now 255 and climbing, or is that yesterday’s news.

A country with violence and murder spiraling upwards is a society in decline. Regardless of how much on the surface there appears to be progress, it means nothing if you cannot even live without fear for yourself and your family.

Criminals seem to be in charge of Trinidad and Tobago. What is even more frightening is the heinous nature of the crimes being committed; from blatant gunning down; to slashing of parent throats in the presence of children. People are disappearing and bodies are turning up in all parts of the country and in some cases never to be found.

Whether it is going out on a date, in the sanctity of your home or even performing an honest day’s work you can be brutally slaughtered. Absolutely no one is safe in Trinidad and Tobago. Our communities are under siege. Taking simple walks or liming with some friends is no longer a luxury we can afford.

Our children are missing and dying. Last year of the 608 people missing 315 were children. Of the five kidnappings for ransom last year, 4 were children. Our society, have become so numb that we did not even notice, that 315 of our children went missing last year.

What manner of government pursues its agenda whilst the nation’s children are disappearing and dying? We have to open our eyes and see the deep hole that Trinidad and Tobago has fallen into, so that we can throw it a line, before we sink to the point of now return.

The government refuses to accept that these startling figures represent human beings. Today its headline and by tomorrow its business as usual everybody forgets whilst we wait on the next gruesome murder. Remember the 12 year old boy who was shot 15 times?

Young boys and girls who have dreams and aspirations are not with us today. We cannot afford to get numb; we cannot afford to watch our future singers, dancers, teachers, nurses, doctors and leaders disappear only to be found dead a few days later or not at all.

How is the government dealing with this runaway crime situation? Like a little child who has found money and do not know what to do with it, the manning administration spent $80 million dollars for US criminologist Prof. Stephen Mastrofksi, to reform the police service.
While we are still waiting on the results of that investment, we the tax payers of Trinidad and Tobago have made Prof. Mastrofski a wealthy man to say the least.

But the government does not stop there. In true Manning style they then proceeded to pay Major General Cameron Ross of Canada $3.1 million to conduct a review of the national security sector. But none of that could have saved a little girl’s life.

Now his best performing minister has turned to the religious leaders. He has now turned to prayers. He must be taking all of us for fools. Well Minister, we are no fools and we not buying into your arrogant nonsense. Only one person believes in the crime plan because crime does not affect him.

So safety and security of the people of this beloved republic means nothing, so long as the government pursues “its” agenda. Instead the armed machinery of the state is directed against people who wish to exercise their right to protest.

Rather than focusing on the real criminals, and the murderers who are terrorizing families and entire communities, the government is criminalizing the peaceful protest of workers, communities and social activists. This fundamental right to freedom of expression and the right to protest, mean nothing so long as the government pursues “its” agenda.

We must not forget the 5th Summit of the Americas, where some $41 million was spent on security. The Prime Minister said this $41 million security system would be incorporated into the national security infrastructure. But where is the evidence Mr. Prime Minister and Mr. Min. of National Security.

Earlier this year Calder Hart said that UDeCOTT is the target of reckless propaganda. Calder Hart operates as though UDeCOTT is his private company. It is our tax payers money and therefore if the public asking critical questions about how their money is spent how is that reckless propaganda.

What exactly is this propaganda? According to the Uff enquiry some $100 million was paid to Hafeez Kharamath Ltd. as advance payment for work done at the Brian Lara Stadium. It further revealed that another $93.6 million was paid to Turner Alpha Ltd. UDeCOTT continues to be accountable to no one except the Prime Minister, and even that we not sure about.

Mr. Hart seem to be running with tax-payers money as though it is his. What is even more disturbing is that as workers struggle to purchase small two bedroom homes at escalating house prices reaching up to $1 million, according to a Newsday report dated June 7, 2009 entitled “A house for Mr. Hart”, the Harts had the privilege of purchasing a 11,002 square foot prime property for a meager $600,000.

Now you tell me who this government really working for? Whilst the Calder Hart’s of this country gets special bargains, workers are being laid off.

But there are many more Calder Harts in other state enterprises and special purpose companies. Take Petrotrin for instance, Because of mismanagement and corruption, various projects at the
Point-a-Pierre refinery, today they are all way over budget and way past the time of delivery, costing the company billions of dollars.

Whilst this is occurring there is absolutely no accountability for the mismanagement of this important state enterprise. The executive management at Petrotrin is a runaway horse and is allowed to do as they are pleased, simply because of their political connection.

At T&TEC the situation is no different. You will recall the former chairman of T&TEC resigning in haste under serious allegations of corruption involving the street lighting implementation unit. Although there was an investigation by the ministry of finance, the report is yet to be made public. They are attempting to cover up its finding to protect a former board member and his friends in government. Today we renew our call for a forensic audit into the Street Lighting Implementation Unit, the award of contracts, the tendering procedure and the corrupt recruitment practices at T&TEC.

We also call for a forensic audit into all financial aspects of Petrotrin operations. If you believe Corruption ended when the UNC had went out of power, today it is even more alive and kicking.

We cannot forget the grave failing of our President to appoint an integrity commission. You know! it is not just that he cannot find people of integrity? but rather it is the fact that he appointed some of them even with obvious questions surrounding them.

The level of our leadership crisis has now reached the highest office holder of this republic, the President! It also seems that the arrogance of the Manning government has rubbed off on our goodly President. As far as he is concern he answered all the questions and we should just “Shut Up and Move on!”.

Amidst all of these political arrogance and abuse of power and authority the economic crisis looms. And how is the government in coalition with the owners and managers of capital responding to the current economic crisis? They have adopted a three prong approach;

1. Retrenchment
2. Pay Cut and
3. blatant violation of the collective agreements.

So whilst on one hand the government is saying that Trinidad and Tobago is experiencing just an economic blip, employers are stating that retrenchments, pay cuts and violation of collective agreements are necessary in response to the economic crisis.

The government itself is on a retrenchment drive starting with the Board of Inland Revenue & Customs. Next on their hit list is the Licensing Authority.

Already hundreds of workers are being retrenched across the country. This means that many workers can no longer provide for their families. It must be remembered that these workers have children who must go to school.
They have to put food on the table for their family, pay their bills, their mortgages or rent. There is no way we can stand idly by and allow the trend of retrenchment to continue.

As a matter of fact we have to go further and take action to ensure that workers are returned to work. We must make it clear that retrenchment is not an option. Call it what you may, Voluntary Separation, Forced Retrenchment or whatever. They all mean the same thing: workers without a job.

Any employer including the state who is thinking of putting retrenchment on the table needs to think again. We will not accept it.

What is even more concerning is that they are summarily dismissing workers without due process? It cannot be possible that after many years of hard won battles, that in 2009 workers are being dismissed without due process. This is a major slap to the face of the labour movement and its history of defending the rights of workers.

For a union to sit idly by and allow this without any reaction is a death wish. By summarily dismissing 30 workers from WASA without just cause and without due process the state has decided to set an example and instill fear in all workers. The idea is to intimidate workers to prevent them from protesting any form of injustice.

Let us make it clear that the OWTU will not stay quiet in the face of this vicious onslaught on workers. Today we renew our call for the immediate re-instatement of the 30 workers at WASA.

No company, whether private or state enterprise can expect to dismiss workers in such a manner without feeling the full force of the labour movement being brought to bear on them. NO WAY! NO HOW!

We must see this brutal and unwarranted attack on the WASA workers as an attack on every worker. We maintain the mantra that workers under attack anywhere must be rescued by workers from everywhere!

The second approach being taken is to reduce workers pay and benefits to maintain their high profit margins. To cut a worker’s pay in light of rising inflation and rising food prices is to dehumanize the worker.

Imagine, just keeping workers at the same pay whilst the cost of living is increasing is itself inhumane. So to take it a step further and cut their pay is to say we have no care for them as people.

How they expect workers to survive? How they expect workers children go to school or eat? How do they expect workers to pay rent or mortgage? How do they expect workers pay their bills? You see these things are of no concern to them so as workers we have no choice but to fight back.

The third approach is to launch a direct attack on collective agreements and terms and conditions of work. To unilaterally and blatantly violate collective agreements, terms and conditions of work,
is to trample over many decades of the trade union movement and attempt to undo 72 years of a
strong tradition here in Trinidad and Tobago.

These agreements are legally binding instruments and are the ultimate protection for a worker. They are a legal manifestation of a worker’s empowered position in relation to his or her employer. Therefore it cannot be taken lightly when an employer attempts to violate or ignore these agreements.

We have to defend them at all cost and force employers to respect them. Without it, the balance of power shifts completely to the side of the employer. Employers must not be allowed to take away these benefits that have been won through long, hard and bitter struggles.

Comrades! Be prepared for the great battle that has to be won for the sake of the trade union movement, not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but throughout the Caribbean. If we do nothing in the face of such unwarranted and brutal attack, then 1937 and the numerous struggles that follow will all be in vain.

With the proud tradition of our progressive labour movement, such an attack must be met with an aggressive counter-attack. Whilst other labour leaders are spending their time and energy just talking or making token statements; we must be in the frontline fighting on, sending the attackers into quick retreat.

Our best line of defense must be to go on an immediate offensive. We must take the fight to them!
Now more than ever the labour movement needs to unite around radical, militant, collective action to defend the great gains after many years of struggle won by workers, and for workers. It cannot be unity in words but must be always unity in action.

One thing we have learned after many years of glorious struggle is, that only through collective action, we can get fundamental change to improve the quality of life of ordinary people. However, the position taken by some Trade Unions is one of accommodation and compromise with the government.

There are no examples in our history to suggest that such positions have improved the lives of ordinary people. So instead of joining forces in collective action and providing quality representation of workers during this particular period, they insist on making accusations of “poaching”.

This allegation of poaching needs to be put to a final resting place once, and for all. Well, we are here in Fyzabad now and what better placed to exorcise this red-herring demon. One of the continuous mistakes people tend to make with the OWTU is that they forget this union long glorious history.

This allegation of poaching is not a new strategy. It was used by Government to attack the OWTU as far back as 1971, when the SWWTU accused the OWTU of poaching. Very soon after these allegations were made the then PNM Government used that opportunity to call a second state of Emergency, the first being called during the 1970 Revolution.
You see, they forget that the OWTU is a national archive in itself and that the history is not forgotten. Different times, same strategy. It shows that they are bankrupt with ideas as to how to deal with this force call the Blue Shirt Army.

Just as they wanted quiet and calm during their obscene extravaganza, called the Fifth Summit of the Americas, they want us to stay quiet as they launch their ferocious attacks on workers.

But this government must remember, that history has proven that those who seek to destroy the OWTU will end up destroying themselves. Our House is strong and no one can push it down, our foundation is from now until thy kingdom come.

There are number of issues around this poaching allegation. First, as we stated before and we will state it again, It is a red-herring used to avoid united action in defense of workers. We have made it absolutely clear that the issue just does not arise, since under the Section 38 (4) of the IRA, a union cannot represent more than one essential industry.

At the moment OWTU represents two essential industries, only because we were the recognized majority Union for these workers before the Act was passed into law.

Once the Act was passed it became IMPOSSIBLE for OWTU to represent workers from another essential industry. The allegation is therefore unsubstantiated and is without basis or merit.

This alone shows that it is a non-issue, a red-herring, meant only as a distraction to cover up their true loyalty, which is not to workers. They refuse to attack the government, instead, they are focusing their energies on the OWTU. What does that say to you?

We must not forget the year 2007, when we demanded that the government settle all outstanding negotiations and workers issues before the general election, the PSA came out publicly against our position because they did not want their party to look bad at an election time.

As if that is not bad enough, remember September 8th last year, the Day of Resistance? Not only did they not support it, but they also came out publicly against it, just 2 days before with the expressed intention to undermine the powerful effect of the Day of Resistance.

Let us be clear, for 8th September, the PSA advised their members to go to work instead, of staying at home in a day of reflection and prayer. Today June 19th, Labour Day, when they should be in Fyzabad to deal with workers issues, they advised their members to stay at home and pray.

More than that, their President has attempted to sabotage this labour day, Butler day, this sacred day, by telling members that she cannot guarantee their safety in Fyzabad, because there will be a lot of rum drinking, could you believe that.

Who better to know about rum drinking in Fyzabad on labour day than the goodly president herself. Remember last year when she came on the platform, instead of dealing with workers issues, Fyzabad had to hear about her personal business about who ’bigger, better and blacker’. She could not have been sober and making those statements on a labour day platform. They are supporters of the government and traitors to the cause, and they must be exposed.
Do you remember when UNC was in power how the PSA was out in their thousands making the place hot like a Chula? Just ask yourselves where is the Chula now? Where is the warrior princess? If anything at all, the princess should be worried about the poor representation she is giving her members, in the face attacks by an anti-worker PNM government.

I say this without fear of contradiction, condemnation or even confrontation. We are an independent trade union and we act in the interest of workers. We will call a spade a spade regardless of who is in government. We hold no brief for the UNC, COP or the PNM or any political party. All of them are with one agenda that is to exploit the working class. So get off the OWTU back Madame President, leave the OWTU alone!

This brings me to a third point which really lies at the heart of the matter; that is quality representation. The question has to be asked, why would members want to leave a Union?

Reactionary Trade Union leaders should spend the time to reflect on this question, rather than making wild accusations against a Union, which has proven time and time again through its track record, that it will take all necessary actions to defend the rights of workers.

The issue of quality representation is a serious one. Once workers feel that their basic livelihood is threaten and their defense team has been compromised by making accommodations and getting approval from government for housing projects and other favours; then of course workers will turn to whoever they feel can give them a certain level of protection and security. To say quite frankly it is the workers’ right to do so.

So, poaching? It is absolute non-sense, a non-issue and a mute point. It is hard to believe that the government and reactionary trade unions would use the same old strategy that was used by the same PNM and SWWTU in 1971 against the OWTU.

The 1st Vice President says that the President General of the OWTU must apologize for statements he made. If there is one apology I must give to the workers is that I must apologize for not exposing them before.

But enough about them! Today is labour day and it is important for us to talk about the exploitation of workers through fixed term contracts. The trend during the 1990s was to offer all employees short-term contracts. The plan was to break the backs of the labour movement.

By offering a worker a fixed term contract which undermines the terms, conditions and benefits enshrined in the collective agreement, an employer is free to really dispose of workers as they pleased. These fixed terms contracts, while undermining job security, also does not carried the benefits guaranteed in collective agreements.

This means that workers have no real protection nor can they negotiate or be part of a collective bargaining unit. In other words workers are completely alone and exposed to the terms set by the employer. We call for an immediate end to the exploitation of all forms of contract labour.
The issue of temporary workers must be high on agenda of the labour movement. It is completely unjust and unfair to have workers working for over 10, 20 and even 30 years as temporary workers.

This means that a worker after giving some 20-30 years of their life and energy contributing to the profit of the company will have absolutely nothing in the end.

In addition, a temporary worker will find it difficult to get a mortgage, or any loan or any other key benefit entitled to the permanent worker. Just as the workers on fixed term contracts, it is really difficult for temporary workers to plan their future. This is unacceptable in 2009.

Whilst this is happening, we are also experiencing the influx of thousands of both skilled and unskilled Chinese workers performing jobs for which many of our workers are in desperate need. The Prime Minister glorifies this method of employment at the expense of our local skilled workforce.

After highlighting just a few of these critical issues, it is becoming clear that we are living in a very unstable environment which has an illusion that all is well in the land. However, this illusion which the Manning government is attempting to create is fooling no one.

Remember the call for peace, quiet and no protest by the Prime Minister during the 5th Summit of the America? Remember how that request was guaranteed by NATUC? They refuse to protest saying they will jam him after.

Where is jamming after? The OWTU gives no such commitment. We protested before, during and we will continue to protest.

We need to be clear that the government accumulated some $104 billion in revenue in 2008. So why are schools still in dilapidated states? Why can’t we get proper medical care, why can’t we pay our pensioners? Why can’t we guarantee some level of food sovereignty? Why can’t we have job security? Why can’t we and our family, feel safe and secure?

The country is crying out, communities are crying out, families are crying out and who hear these cries? Our children are hurting and a sense of desperation and uncertainty is spreading across the land.

It has therefore become absolutely necessary for an intervention by the labour movement to end this crisis and save our republic. The purpose of this intervention is to rescue Trinidad and Tobago from this continuous crisis.

The labour movement has had to intervene at several moments in the history of Trinidad and Tobago to save workers and protect working men and women. When faced with a barrage of attacks we have always had to step in to ensure that working men and women can live a life with dignity.

The labour movement must again intervene to transform the society. The time has come again for such an intervention.
We must make it abundantly clear that we are not only rescuing Trinidad and Tobago from the PNM, but also from the UNC and the COP. They are different players but the same game and we have had enough of all of them.

In his 1946 Election Manifesto this is what Butler had to say:

“............... together we faced an enemy with all the Imperial might and military power of Imperial Britain behind him.

Then, as now, we had nothing but our great faith in God, and in the rightness and justice of our cause.

Then, as now we were denied elementary human rights and were prepared to die fighting for these rights,

then as now we looked to heaven as the great Arsenal of all those who have laboured and still continue to labour for the rich who have kept back by fraud their hire.

The workers of the Colony for the past few months have been counseled to clear the decks and to stand by for action to win a fairer share of the very great wealth they create by the sweat of their brows, action to ensure for all Workers everywhere in the Colony better living and working Conditions. The time for such action has quite definitely arrived”

I want to suggest that then as now, the statement is as relevant today in 2009. It was 72 years ago this day, on this junction on an evening like this one the working class stormed unto the pages of history and created their own destiny.

Today we even though have relinquished our colonial chains, like then we face an enemy but with neo-colonial ideas and an armed force behind him.

Like then as workers were prepared to die fighting for elementary human rights, today we too must be prepared to fight.

Like then we must clear the decks and be ready to stand for action to win a fair share of the very great wealth we create by the sweat of our brows.

We too must be ready for action to ensure better living and working conditions for all workers in Trinidad and Tobago.

Like then the time for such action has arrived!

It is time to rescue Trinidad and Tobago

LONG LIVE THE OILFIELD WORKERS TRADE UNION!!
LONG LIVE THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT!!
LONG LIVE THE WORKING CLASS OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO!!
AS WE GO FORWARD EVER, AND BACKWARD NEVER
BECAUSE WE WILL NEVER EVER COMPROMISE OR SURRENDER!!