President General Ancel Roget’s Address
To the OWTU 71st Annual Conference of Delegates
OWTU Paramount Building, San Fernando
23 July 2010

Comrade Carlton Gibson, First Vice President and Chairman of our 71st Annual Conference of Delegates; our feature speaker, Cde. Gonzalo Berron, Adviser for the Area of Regional Integration of the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA), delegates to this 71st Annual Conference of Delegates.

Former President General and Honorary General Council Member and now Member of Parliament and Minister of Labour in the People’s Partnership Government - Comrade Errol K. Mcleod

Specially invited Guests, Friends, Well wishers, Comrades Sisters & Brothers! Good Evening

Comrade Chairman on the occasion of this 71st Annual Conference of Delegates I think it is important that we remind ourselves of what our Annual Conference of Delegates is all about.

The Annual conference of Delegates is one of the most significant occasions for the OWTU and it is the highest decision making body in the union.

Our Annual Conference of Delegates is not only about looking at the union’s membership, its finances, the union’s assets and liability; it is not only about approving the general council’s report with the draft budget and estimated revenue for the financial year.

It is not only about looking at workers’ issues at various workplaces, collective agreements, matters at the industrial court and generally improving workers’ terms and conditions of work.

Comrade Chairman, as important as those things are, our Annual Conference of Delegates is a lot more than that.

It is much more than that because our delegates, all of whom are drawn from all the different branches and district committees in the union, through our democratic process, these delegates are charged with a much greater responsibility.

Their responsibility is not only to make decisions on behalf of OWTU and its members, but also on behalf of all working people of Trinidad and Tobago and the society as a whole.

So for this 71st ACOD we must examine the decisions that were made at our conference last year and its impact, and we also must examine the current challenges and opportunities that were created by those decisions.

Comrade Chairman, two things I would like to focus on this evening.

The first one is, what happened from the last conference to this one, in other words let us look at how we have journeyed to reach to this point Today from last year.

The second thing I want us to focus on this evening is the opportunities and challenges we face as we march forward.
I want to suggest that these challenges we face and the opportunities that were created came as a direct result of the decisions we made at our last conference.

Comrade chairman, I want us to remember that last year when we examined the political and economic climate it was clear was that there was a plan by the enemy to destroy the Oilfields Workers Trade Union.

There are those who would want us to forget this. But we must always remember that those who forget their history are doomed to repeat it.

And therefore to be able to go forward we must remind ourselves of the atrocities committed by the PNM against the OWTU simply because we dare to reject their corrupt anti-worker, anti-people, neo-liberal agenda.

Let us not forget the different shape and form these attacks took. Their plan was to weaken the entire labour movement starting with the decertification of CWU and TIWU; then it was the merger of Cipriani College of Labour into the PNM government politically run UTT (University of Trinidad and Tobago).

They continued their attacks by attempting to introduce RATT (Revenue Authority of Trinidad and Tobago) in the public service with other targets like Licensing authority and immigration department.

We knew fully well that it was just a matter of time if they were successful, they would have taken God out of their thoughts completely and come at the OWTU.

We cannot forget the threat by Patrick Manning himself to send home 2,500 Petrotrin workers, nor can we forget the implications for job loss with their decision to merge 5 companies namely T&TEC, NP, NGC, Petrotrin & NEC into one mega energy company. With this merger, thousands of workers, our members would have been sent home.

Comrade Chairman, their ultimate plan was not to have OWTU as the Recognised Majority Union in this new energy company.

Remember the property tax to penalize citizens after their obscene squander-mania; two summits, 2 million dollar flag, rampant corruption in state enterprises, the UDECOTT scandal just to name a few.

If we think it was bad then, today it is revealed that that was only the tip of the iceberg with daily reports of corruption.

They would like us to forget that as they present themselves as angels led by a Rottweiler in the absence of an emperor. Comrade Chairman, as we move forward, we will not forget those things.

You see Comrade Chairman, as Manning and the PNM was the problem yesterday, today Rowley and PNM could never be the solution.
It was against the background of all of these attacks the delegates at our conference last year took the conscious decision to intensify the struggle against the clear and imminent threat of the PNM. Patrick Manning himself said he will deal with the OWTU. It was clear that it was either OWTU or the PNM.

Remember last year when we said if there was no Petrotrin there will be no PNM, well to protect Petrotrin and its workers PNM had to go!

But Comrade Chairman our intensified campaign against the PNM was not only to protect the OWTU, but to defend the entire country by ensuring that they are removed from power.

There are many who are laying claim to the downfall of the Manning regime.

Well we are not going to join that ban wagon, but we do need to present the facts and clarify the role the OWTU played as a vanguard trade union within that.

And today we make absolutely no apology for the role the Oilfields Workers’ Trade Union played and was playing long before the election bell was rung.

Throughout our union’s history on so many occasions too numerous to count, concerted efforts were made to destroy this union. Countless were these attacks sometime brazen and bold sometimes feeble, but nevertheless consistent in their attempt.

All their guns and poison arrow heads were always aim with surgical precision at the heart of this union in their relentless attempt to destroy the OWTU.

So the PNM was just another one that can be counted among the many who failed miserably in their attempt to destroy the OWTU.

So you see Comrade Chairman we must never forget the famous words of the former President General, the Indomitable George Weekes “Those who tried to destroy the OWTU only succeed in destroying themselves”.

And therefore at last year’s annual conference we took the position that not only we must respond but that the struggle must intensify.

Therefore comrade Chairman immediately after last year’s Annual conference, the Blue Shirt army took to the battle field.

As a matter of fact the blue shirt army intensified our Labour Day commitment to rescue Trinidad and Tobago through a series of solidarity actions at WASA, at TSTT, at the Ministry of Social Development, at the Ministry of Agriculture, at Nestle and at our very own Petrotrin & T&TEC and many others, too numerous to mention.

There were many factors that contributed to the downfall of the Patrick Manning PNM regime including the fact that it collapsed under its own weight of obscene corruption and the contradictions which were inherent in the path the PNM was taking the people of Trinidad and Tobago.
Comrade Chairman, remember our actions on September 8, 2009? It was long before May 24 this year.

This was when OWTU with other civil society organizations staged a candle light vigil for prayer and reflection on the future of Trinidad and Tobago. Remember that Vigil?

The rallying cry was Unite People’s Power and like the army of Joshua we marched around the red house seven times and indeed 9 months later the walls of the PNM came tumbling down. Let us not forget that!

Comrade Chairman December 18 is a date we must never forget when the real beast and true repressive nature of the Patrick Manning regime when the country witnessed in shock and horror the brutal use of force, the beating of comrades and the wrongful and malicious arrest of Comrade David Abdulah during a peaceful picket against the draconian property tax.

And then they want to tell us that we must support the PNM or we must not be involved in politics, stick to trade union issues. Hell no!

It is against all of these and numerous other actions of the PNM against the people, too numerous for us to mention today that on March 25 the General Council took the historic decision and took the battle straight to the emperor himself at his constituency office here in San Fernando.

Remember Comrade Chairman the General Council protested and demanded that elections be called now.

Therefore the decisions of last year’s conference mandating us to take those necessary actions has resulted in where we are today. And that comrade Chairman is a snap shot of the journey from last year’s conference to now.

Let me just say clear and with no uncertainty comrade chairman that these actions were political actions and this evening we make absolutely no apology for our political intervention, which intervention contributed to the demise of the PNM.

Looking forward Comrade Chairman let us now examine the way forward.

Comrade Chairman we must now look to the future with all its possibilities and opportunities. This is what we must spend some time to discuss.

The important arrival of MSJ on the political landscape of Trinidad and Tobago has created a platform for our nation to move forward and progress as it should always with people at the centre of that progress.

Comrade Chairman if comrades are paying careful attention to my remarks tonight then it therefore would have come as no surprise that Movement for Social Justice entered the political history of Trinidad and Tobago.

There are those who say the union should not be in politics well to those I say read, just read a little bit about our history and you just might learn something about labour and politics.
This tradition goes back to the turn of this century with the formation of the Trinidad Working Men Association. Comrade Chairman that is over 100 years ago.

Throughout the century we have had labour and political leaders from Captain Arthur Cipriani to Adrian Cola Rienzi and of course the Chief Servant and founding father Uriah Butler. Joining our Chief Servant was Daisy Crick, Thelma Williams, Elma Francois, Jim Barette and Christina King. There were all labour leaders who through various political vehicles shaped the political landscape of Trinidad and Tobago.

Through these political vehicles the struggle for equity and social justice intensified culminating in the 1937 Labour Riots and insurrection.

Comrade Chairman, the Conference must remember that the 1946 election, the first elections based on universal adult suffrage was fought by mainly labour based political parties.

This tradition continued through the decades under leaders like George Weekes, Lennox Pierre, Quintin O'Connor, John La Rose. Comrades are these not familiar names for the OWTU.

Every OWTU officer must know these names once you participated in our progressive training programme, or visited the Port of Spain Hall or our library right here.

Yes comrades this is our tradition, a tradition according our vision we must continue if we are to achieve a society with the power to determine its own destiny on the basis of equity, social justice and a decent standard of living for all.

Continuing the tradition in 1975 George Weekes, Basdeo Panday and Raffique Shah led the formation of the United Labour Front which fought the 1976 general elections and comrades fighting and winning the constituency of Oropouche was none other than Cde. Errol Kevin McLeod, who was at the time President of the Pointe-a-Pierre Branch and would later become the President General of OWTU from 1987-2008.

We recognized Cde. McLeod who is fulfilling this tradition as Member of Parliament for Point-a-Pierre and Minister of Labour, Small and Micro Enterprises.

There is one thing that links all the previous movements and political vehicles and that is the vision and campaign to change the system of governance and transform the nature of politics. This includes the race politics which has gripped and stifle the people of Trinidad and Tobago for the last 50 years.

Comrade Chair this must be our goal going forward as we consolidate and strengthen the workers movement.

It is for this reason the Workers’ Agenda includes constitutional reform, but not the constitution reform bandied about by the PNM and using that to deny citizens their democratic right by postponing local government elections.
Would you believe I heard a PNM ad actually talking about the people's partnership taking away our democracy?

That is the same PNM which postponed the local government elections and it was the same Rowley who voted every time for the postponement of the elections.

That is hypocrisy! Their local government campaign is based on lies and hypocrisy and we must reject them as we did on May 24th.

The constitutional reform we are talking about is one which is intended to transfer power back to the people.

It was only a few days ago that Cde. Dennis Pantin, a fighter in this regard and recipient of the OWTU highest honour, the labour star was laid to rest.

The OWTU stands by this important step towards achieving changing our system of governance. Comrade Chairman, MSJ emerged out of several years of struggle which was intensified over this last year and represents a continuation of the vision to change the system of governance. The participation of MSJ therefore in the Partnership is critical in pursuing this goal.

Our presence in the Partnership is also necessary to ensure that all that we have labored for over the last seventy something years is represented in this new political dispensation. To do otherwise would be to fail in our duty and responsibility as a vanguard and progressive organization.

We have an entire field of timari to uproot and in the absence of an abrupt revolution we must therefore engage in a revolutionary process which will guarantee that we achieve a society with the power to determine its own destiny on the basis of equity, social justice and a decent standard of living for all.

The OWTU support and involvement in MSJ is the realisation of our vision and a continuation of the tradition of the Mass Movement. One of the most important contributions that MSJ will make is the breaking of the race politics which has crippled the development of our people and denied us the opportunity to realise our full potential.

For too long the mass movement has been divided not the basis of ideology but it has been divided solely on the basis of race.

That Comrade Chairman must end and must end now! The People’s Partnership with the inclusion of MSJ has started that important work of dismantling the politics of race.

Building on the tradition of the 1930s and legacy of the labour movement which witnessed a united mass movement, MSJ will make this goal one that is of paramount importance.

This is what makes the Movement for Social Justice different and necessary. We must therefore re-affirm our vision and commit to strengthening our political vehicle. This is our legacy, this is our tradition as move forward ever! Backward never!