



MINISTER OF LABOUR AND SMALL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

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30th October, 2019

Ms. Omatie Lyder
Editor
Trinidad Express Newspapers
Independence Square
Port of Spain

Dear Madam,

Minister of Labour responds to Unfair Newspaper Editorial

In the editorial published in the Trinidad Express Newspaper dated today Wednesday October 30th, 2019, the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development has been admonished for having made the point that the Ministry of Labour “*can’t be held responsible if a worker is so afraid to report employers*” because they should “*recognize that they have rights enshrined in the law*”.

I was indeed taken aback that the writer could have stretched his/her imagination to arrive at a conclusion that, by making this statement, I was taking an easy way out and showing a lack of sensitivity to the most vulnerable workers in this beloved twin Island State.

Anyone who knows me and what I stand for, would know beyond all reasonable doubt that, that misleading impression far from represents who I am. That this statement could have conveyed an incorrect impression of my character displays an abundant lack of sensitivity on the part of the writer to the fact that, my statement could only have been made within the spirit of a specific context alien to that which the writer conveyed.

Ironically, what made the accusations which followed so hurtful was that almost every suggestion which the writer was making to pontificate to the Ministry what the staff should be engaged in doing had been engaging the dedicated and committed attention of the Ministry which I have the honour and pleasure to lead.

From the day that I assumed office in this Ministry, my focus on the rights and privileges of workers has been the foremost concern. It is the reason why this Ministry of Labour has held over thirty (30) Consultations on the reform of Labour Legislation in Trinidad and Tobago; the likes of which has never before been attempted.

The writer would only have had to recall the Public Awareness Programme which this Ministry has, only a few weeks ago embarked upon, where all the items of Labour Legislation to protect the rights and privileges of workers and indeed employers were laid out and extensively promulgated in all arms of the media in Trinidad and Tobago.

What is even more interesting is that one of the Headings of a Special Report in the Sunday Express of October 27th 2019 on the Minimum Wage was titled “Minister Urged Workers not to be fearful about seeking after their Rights”, which actually reflects my deep concern for these vulnerable persons. Perhaps, it is timely to share with the writer of the editorial and the citizens at large that only recently, the Cabinet commenced consideration of this Ministry’s Employment of Migrants Action Plan (EMAP). This is a clinically developed set of proposals to ensure that the rights and privileges of migrant workers are upheld to much the same degree as all workers of Trinidad and Tobago.

The aim of EMAP is to also ensure that all migrant workers in Trinidad and Tobago are ensured decent work by raising their awareness of their rights and responsibilities in the workplace. The EMAP also allows for an ongoing systematic approach to address the employment of Migrant Workers.

Included among other initiatives of the Ministry’s EMAP Proposals are:

1. Strengthening of the Labour Inspectorate Unit so that the Unit can respond more expeditiously to the demands of the workers of all categories.
2. Development of the public awareness campaign on rights and responsibilities of employment for workers including the need to have awareness multimedia material reproduced in Spanish.
3. Establishment of Hotlines for the Labour Inspectorate and Conciliation, Advisory and Advocacy Units (formerly Conciliation Unit) of the Ministry to enhance the Ministry's education and rapid response and enforcement efforts.
4. Partnership and collaboration with Social Partners including other Government Ministries and Agencies to engage in the roll out of education campaigns.
5. Provision of technical assistance from the International Labour Organization and International Organization for Migration.
6. Assistance with collection of data on labour migration and information to prevent and combat labour exploitation, forced labour, including child labour.
7. Introduction of joint blitz operations with the Occupational Safety and Health Authority (OSHA) and the Labour Inspectorate Unit (LIU), National Insurance Board (NIB) from time to time with the purpose of identifying labour breaches or exploitation of the suspected victims and to take corrective action where deemed necessary.
8. Development of Employment Contract and Pay Slip Templates.
9. The Ministry through the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee (IRAC) is in the process of completing the development of an Employment Standards Bill for Trinidad and Tobago which will set a minimum floor of remuneration, benefits and rights to all employees in an employment relationship.

These are just to name a few of the Initiatives of this Ministry which are being considered by the Cabinet.

It is also noteworthy that we are well advanced in introducing Amendments to the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act which will provide for the protection of workers whose jobs are terminated due to insolvency, redundancy and receivership as well as Amendments to the Industrial Relations Act and Workmen's Compensation Act with the rights and privileges and workers foremost in mind.

These are but a few of the initiatives which the hard working staff of this Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development have been busily engaged in and which in some instances have already begun to bear fruit.

It is against this background that I humbly submit that any suggestion that the Ministry of Labour and that I as Minister of Labour have been wanting or laxing in the discharge of our collective responsibilities to the workers of Trinidad and Tobago at all levels is rather unfair.

I trust that this body of information is shared with the readers in similar fashion as the Editorial.

With kind regards,

Jennifer Baptiste-Primus

October 30th, 2019