

## **REPORT: The Barbados Workers' Union Youth Committee**

Youth are impacted by a number of issues, including un(der)employment, globalization and HIV/AIDS. While these problems are not unique to youth, this age group is most vulnerable for a number of reasons and so, most impacted.

The Barbados Workers' Union (BWU) responded to the Youth Employment Challenge in Barbados by establishing a Youth Committee in 1993. This was a direct response to a resolution put forward at the Union's 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Delegates' Conference in 1993. The wide mandate of this Committee was in keeping with the premise on which most other young workers' groups were established: "**To Give Young People a Voice and to Empower Them**".

Initially, activities planned were for the most part social; but overtime the focus has shifted and greater attention has been given to training and education and youth participation. Recruitment of new members tends to be general and not gender specific by age or sex. Within the last two (2) years, the Union has directed organising efforts to workers in Tourism, Finance, Retail and Information Systems. Although these efforts are not specific to the recruitment of youth, there are however the sectors in which a majority of the employed young labour force can be found.

On May 22 2004, the Youth Committee successfully established the **BWU Youth Arm** at its inaugural Youth Congress held at the Union's Headquarters. This event was organised in keeping with the Union's theme for that year "**Strengthening Relationships**" and was aimed at invoking greater participation among youth 35 years and under.

Since its inception in 1993, the Youth Committee's work has included the planning of educational lectures and discussions, public speaking and debates, voluntary work assistance programmes, social, sporting and cultural activities and outreach to schools.

The Youth Arm has hosted a number of workshops aimed at raising awareness among its young membership through trade union education and training. One-week seminars are conducted twice a year in collaboration with the Barbados Workers' Union Labour College and discussion topics include *Collective Bargaining Issues for Young Workers, Decent Work for Youth, History of the Barbados Workers Union, Leadership and the Young Worker, Substance Abuse, STDs and Your Health, The future of the BWU and the Young Worker*. This last topic aims at helping the young participant to see how they are valued within the Union and how they contribute to its viability.

### **Organising Schools**

The Youth Committee for the past ten (10) years has coordinated a Schools Outreach Programme for students of Secondary Schools across the island of Barbados (i.e. students between the ages of 11-17). The central theme of this programme over the years has been "*Preparing Youth for the World of Work*".

Topics covered in the programme include *Globalization, Youth and Society, Conflict Resolution, Making Work Meaningful, Work Attitudes and Ethics, Discipline in the Workplace, Mental, Physical and Environmental Health and Gender Issues*. These activities are aimed at giving participants a better understanding of the history and role of the Barbados Workers' Union.

In the past the Committee has successfully negotiated placement for students of its adopted high school to benefit from job training at some businesses during the summer period. It was

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agreed that weekly job evaluations would be conducted to ensure that feedback is provided and that students get maximum benefits from the programme.

The BWU coordinates an annual "Week of Excellence Programme", an initiative which has been pursued to develop a better national environment; focusing on improving productivity and service excellence within Barbados and among its membership in particular. It is intended to have the social partners participate in exercises that engender mutual respect among all sides. During this week, the Youth Committee addresses school students around the topic, "*Excellence at School and Beyond*".

The Committee has extended its Schools' Outreach to the primary schools (4-11). In fact, the BWU has adopted one (1) primary school and in 2003 hosted a retreat for some of these students under the theme "*I am Someone Special*".

### ***Organising Communities***

The Committee has adopted one of the largest Children's Homes in Barbados as one of its primary projects. Members make visits to the home where they play, interact and assist with the grooming of the children, provide clothing, take responsibility for ensuring that repairs are carried out and providing food hampers. Every year as part of May Day Celebrations, the Youth Committee hosts a party on Heroes' Day for children from all Children's Homes across the length and breadth of Barbados.

In keeping with its objective of Organising Communities/Community Outreach, the Barbados Workers' Union during its May Day Celebrations of 2004 officially opened a Children's Park in the memory of Gordon Parris, the first Chairperson of the Youth Committee who died in January 2005. Mr. Parris was intimately involved in planning and galvanizing support for the play park which was donated to the people of the surrounding community and other community activities of this Committee.

The Youth Committee has established, and continues to pursue links with other national youth organisations and programmes.

- 1) Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme (April 1996). This is a government initiative established to encourage youth to pursue self-employment endeavours. This programme offers mentorship training, personal development programmes business planning and management training. Commendable efforts have been made to extend this entrepreneurial culture to students from the primary school level and up through the Junior Entrepreneurship Programme.
- 2) Barbados Youth Service. This programme provides personal development skills, disciplinary training and attitude building to youth between the ages of 16 -22. This programme embraces technical, academic, sports and life skills training.
- 3) Barbados Vocational Training Board and the TVET Council. The TVET Council is a national tripartite body responsible for standard setting and ensuring the implementation and coordination of programmes, tests and qualifications. This particular programme specifically targets individuals about to enter the small and micro-enterprise sector and not those currently in the sector.

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Last year the Youth Arm developed particular interests with "*Project Oasis*" – a Government effort coordinated through the Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture. This programme addresses the particular issues of disadvantaged/marginalized youth, who are discriminated against based on their "drop-out" status and certain other stereo-types. It seeks to provide them with tools that will equip them with necessary skills for integration into the formal economy and for entrepreneurial pursuits.

At its second Youth Conference, carrying the theme "*Empowering Young Workers Through Education*", a panel discussion (Boys on the Block) featuring representatives and beneficiaries of the Project Oasis Programme led the young participants attending the Congress into discussions that facilitated plans and seminars to specifically assist marginalized youth.

In response to the challenge set by the Union's Executive Council in 2004 to develop ideas to challenge more youth into formal employment, the Youth Arm has developed programmes to target two (2) specific groups:

- Students leaving secondary school
- Young rehabilitants from the Prison.

### 1) *Students leaving secondary school*

Coming out of its 2005 "*World of Work*" Seminar, a follow-up forum has been planned for students who attended. At this forum, representatives from Government and Private Sector Organisations will be on hand to showcase job and product offerings. Arrangements are in progress for students to be given interviews with these organisations and be provided with training for which they will receive a stipend. While plans have not been confirmed, the government will be lobbied to fund this programme out of its "training levy fund".

### 2) *Ex-Prisoners*

The Youth Arm has made plans to target young persons involved in the prison educational programme provided through Her Majesty's Prison. Inmates involved in this programme benefit from high school education (O'Levels) and training in the culinary and visual arts.

The Youth Arm will in collaboration with the Union's Labour College seek to provide these young people with training in *Conflict Resolution, Grievance Handling and Entrepreneurship*. It is anticipated that this training will provide participants with the tools and coping skills for successful integration into a formal employment environment; supporting and encouraging them rather than the typical response of ostracizing them.

The Youth Arm has already started to formulate plans to undertake discussions with Government in view of securing an arrangement which would reserve 10% of the work in government tenders for youth; especially for those that have successfully completed Vocational Training Programmes. This proposal is a response to the Youth Arm's employment creation objective.

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More broadly, the Youth Committee anticipates being part of a wider international campaign aimed at promoting decent work with a focus on employment creation, workers' rights and employability. This campaign will focus on targeting youth through the media and other appropriate networks.

### **The Challenge**

The Youth Committee of the Barbados Workers' Union has made some progress towards the achievement of its goals. However there is yet tremendous scope for improved effort.

First of all, within the Union itself, there is a need to develop statistical data, which would facilitate the Union's efforts to identify the composition of its unionized young workforce. This is a replica of the wider need for a national Labour Market Information System (LMIS) in Barbados. This information would no doubt allow for more careful youth programme planning and implementation, extending to a wider cross-section of youth.

Organizing efforts have to be intensified and targeted to youth. A particular challenge is finding innovative ways to achieve this objective without impacting workers who hold fast to conventional Trade Union thinking. This effort needs to be coordinated with the Union's Gender Committee to target address the specific issues of female youth.

With the amalgamation of the Caribbean region into a Single Market, there now exists a greater need for unions within the Caribbean region to form coalitions to address the needs of its membership and to strengthen their power base. Youth Committee Activities may therefore need to adopt a more regional focus.

Marketing efforts needs to be extended to target youth at their points of interest and to interest them in supporting the Youth Committee's activities.

In keeping with the above recommendation is the need for the Union to expand its information technology resources. Included in its web page should be a link for youth workers, concerning information related to the labour market, workers' rights, a help desk for youth on various issues and advertising other issues of interest to them. However, while this suggestion is desired, it is constrained by lack of adequate resources.

The Youth Arm recognises that it is not sufficient to set objectives targeted at the needs of young workers but we must partner with youth and be committed to executing programs in their interest.