

Guyana Public Service Union

MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT/CEO, MR. PATRICK YARDE ON THE OCCASION OF GPSU'S 99TH ANNIVERSARY.

The 99th anniversary of the struggles of the Guyana Public Service Union being celebrated today Wednesday June 8, 2022 is an occasion that members past and present must be proud, because the stance for “Justice for the Public Employee” that have had to be taken amid political assaults on the constitutional rights of workers and attempts to erode hard-won gains. It is because of the long arduous battle of the years that gave rise to the theme “Relentlessly and Continuously for 99 years pursuing Justice for Public Employees.”

The achievements of the Union were made through unity and solidarity of its members over the years, beginning June 8, 1923. The struggle for better working conditions, security of tenure, equality and fair wages, while providing high-quality public service to our nation has been a grueling and seemingly never ending journey.

The Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU) was first founded under colonial rule as the British Guiana Civil Service Association (BGCSA) on June 8, 1923, but was formal registration as Trade Union No 55 on the November 5, 1948. Following the declaration of Guyana as a Republic in 1970, the Union was rebranded as the Guyana Public Service Union in 1972, and subsequently merged with the Medical Employees Union in 1975.

The GPSU made its greatest strides during the mid-1960's and throughout the 1970's, because of the impetus for change provided by the Governments of that period and the underlying pro-working-class sentiments that existed in that era. As such, Governments at that time entered into agreements to benefit workers and the substance of these pacts informed Public Service Rules, Regulations and Guidelines for treatment of workers throughout the years. There were also several Collective Labour Agreements with Governments of Guyana, including the Avoidance and Settlement of Disputes Agreement, Union Dues Check-off and Agency Fees Agreement, Secondment to the GPSU Agreement, Trade Union Leave for attending meetings and Leave for Trade Union Education, etc. In summary, the gains included ratification of all fundamental International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions to protect Trade Union rights and workers' rights, amendment of the Constitution of Guyana to include the feature to make all Collective Agreements legally binding, establishment of the National Insurance Scheme as a basis of insuring workers against potential work risks, and entrenchment of pensions as a constitutional right, among other things. One of the most fundamental achievements was the amendment of the Constitution of Guyana to approve the establishment of the Public Service Appellate Tribunal, which facilitated Public Servants seeking redress from decisions of the Public Service Commission. More tangibly were the Lamaha Gardens land scheme for Public Service housing and the GPSU Sports Complex land at Thomaslands.

Notwithstanding this, wages, salaries and allowances, as well as, abuse of workers' rights and poor working environments remained the lynchpin over the years that successive Governments refused to deal with adequately, because of proclaimed economic reasons and the private sector selfish interests in maintaining a cheap labour market in Guyana. The importance of these elements to the stability of the workforce, put the GPSU unionized workers on collision courses with Governments, even though as a Union its preference was always to find amicable solutions to the attainment of workers' rights through negotiations, consistent with the agreed steps of Collective Labour Agreements signed between Government and GPSU.

As a result of Governments' innate desires to maintain workers conditions of service at its lowest and the fact that wages, salaries and allowances in Guyana remained lower than those in neighbouring Caribbean territories, together with corresponding working environments in those countries that were much more advanced and worker friendly. These issues then became the main roots of clashes between Government and GPSU. GPSU, nevertheless, maintained its agitation for better conditions of service and in 1993, Government conceded that there were employed poor in the Public Service, but failed to take corrective measures to deal with the situation.

In 1999, following a strike that lasted fifty-seven days an arbitration tribunal ruled in favour of GPSU, with the result that the wages and salaries of Public Servants were increased significantly, with awards of 31.06% for 1999 and 26.66% for the year 2000. The award at that time angered the Government, but it complied with the awarded percentages for wages and salaries, while disregarding the awards for allowances and reintroduction of increments. As a backlash to the Union, Government suspended the check-offs for Union Dues and Agency fees and frustrated Public Servants attempts to re-register with the Union.

Regrettably, the GPSU over the years thereafter have met with many unmerited challenges from the employer of its members and other political elements that sought to undermine the Union. However, the leadership has maintained its independence and has conducted itself fearlessly and professionally, in a manner that can stand up to scrutiny, at all times.

In recognition of those past union stalwarts, who started this amazing journey, laying the foundation upon which we currently stand and imbued our organization with the fortitude and strength, we must say thanks. To those of us, who are challenged to continue this journey, I say let us do so unwaveringly, for we owe ourselves and the future employees of the State that much.

Brothers and Sisters, let me reiterate the need for unity throughout the membership to confront and remove the obstacles to a better future. Our Union predates the formation of any existing political party in Guyana.

It is therefore necessary to re-energize and intensify the pursuit: (a) for the upliftment of the employed poor through bargaining for a living minimum wage for the Public Service, in so doing enhancing the remuneration of all professional, technical and managerial workers; (b) to eradicate the scourge of racism and discrimination; and (c) eliminate all undesirable tendencies, internal and external unconscionable practices.

We must continue to lead by example and never lose sight of the fact that Public Servants are the premier workforce and are custodians of the nations' resources and the implementors of the Country's developmental programmes. As such, we should demand that Government, the Employer, adhere to laws, respect the rights of Public Servants and that of all workers and desist from political discrimination. We must also demand that Government must be inclusive, through the involvement of all stakeholders in meaningful dialogues that are commensurate with individual and national goals, whereby wealth could be distributed equitably to all.

However, let us not forget the dangers posed by climate change and the prevailing Coronavirus Disease 2019 and other imminent biological threats plaguing our society today, all of which impacts our daily lives to a large extent.

God Bless the Guyana Public Service Union, its past and present officers and members, who fought for betterment over the 99 years of the struggle.

June 8, 2022