

Guyana Public Service Union

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT/CEO MR. PATRICK M. YARDE ON THE OBSERVANCE OF WORKERS' DAY 2022

Guyana Public Service Union (GPSU) wholeheartedly advocates and supports good governance, because it believes such a hallmark leads to the realization of true democracy, progress and development on the macro level and citizens that are satisfied, healthy and happy on the micro level. Over the years, successive Governments have destroyed possibilities of Guyana's development through selfish political agendas that have done nothing to satisfy the motto "One People, One Nation, One Destiny." It is in this context that GPSU elaborates on some of its major concerns on the occasion of the observance of Workers' Day 2022.

The Constitution of Guyana entitles all citizens to freedom of association, as well as, trade union rights. Notwithstanding this constitutional entitlement there has been glaring double standards by governments' disrespect for this mandate. Very often workers are treated with disdain based on their perceived political affiliation or ethnicity. Similarly, organisations are likewise treated based on politicians' opinions or perceptions of political allegiances and are often subjected to various acts of discrimination and victimization, including unlawful abuses, acts of executive lawlessness and unlawful political conduct that are clearly and frequently displayed through the abuse of both workers and citizens alike.

Discrimination and victimization have taken many forms, viz.

- Non-renewal of employment contracts of senior ranking persons, who were inappropriately labeled as operatives of opposing political parties, to make way for party supporters and opportunists, who are willing to do Governments' bidding.
- Politically orchestrated supersessions, in clear violation of the Constitution of Guyana established rules.
- Denial of the right to work, including the denial of full property. These violations of workers' rights also occurred through the use of illegal COVID-19 orders, where workers without COVID-19 vaccinations were locked out of workplaces and deemed absent from duty without leave. Some had their employment terminated, while some suffered salary cuts, in violation of their constitutional rights.
- Payment of poverty wages, salaries and allowances, a policy seemingly designed or intended to keep workers weak, while selectively paying higher wages, salaries and allowances to a chosen few.

- Acting in conflict with workers' rights enshrined in the Constitution, Labour Laws, ILO Conventions, and legally binding Collective Labour Agreements (CLA) of which Governments are well aware or cannot use ignorance to disclaim.
- Failure to reconstitute several Constitutional bodies, including the Public Service Commission, a ploy detrimental and unfair to Public Servants.
- Ill-treatment and disrespect for women folk from the heights of the Judiciary and Legislature to ordinary citizens.
- Atrocious and risky work environments, especially in the health sector.
- The manifestation of total disregard for Trade Unions and the rights of workers by consecutive appointments of incompetent Ministers of Labour, in the forms of Keith Scott and Joseph Hamilton, both of whom lack knowledge about the responsibilities of the Ministry of Labour and therefore lost themselves in a political abyss, with the penchant of disinterest in the rights of workers. This is compounded by Mr. Hamilton's statement that Trade Unions are irrelevant and was notably absent from the Wreath Laying Ceremony for Critchlow which was the first in the history of the country.

The unlawful discriminatory acts and abuses, including acts of executive lawlessness and illegal political conduct must and will be challenged by the GPSU, not only because they are impediments to racial harmony, but majorly, a firm stance must be taken to herald in good governance in Guyana. It must be reiterated that GPSU is an apolitical Organisation that respects its members' constitutional rights and freedoms to participate in any Organisation of their choice and is prepared to defend those rights. GPSU is also a principled trade union, which strives to ensure that its members are committed to their professional employment obligations.

The PPP/C Government, since its return to office in the year 2020, continued the glaring tirade to politicize the public services towards its own narrow political aspirations. In this regard, it has been facilitating political involvement in the Public Service through the implantation of political operatives under specialized contracts within the Public Service and in instances appointments are made against established Public Service positions. This has proven detrimental to effectiveness of public services, national unity, and has had debilitating effects on national development.

On November 18, 2021 the PPP/C regime imposed a meagre 7% increase in wages and salaries on Public Servants, the premier workforce sending shockwaves through the Nation that observed and reacted positively to its 2020 election campaign promise of a much-deserved 50 percent Wages and Salary increase for Public Servants. Following the declaration of the miniscule increase, persons in society, including the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, were horrified at what now appears to be blatant misrepresentation at the political level. Soon thereafter the media was abuzz with evidence of prior Parliamentary

support for both the collective bargaining process and 50% wages and salaries increases for Public Servants and the subsequent People Progressive Party/Civic (PPP/C) campaign lure that was said to be photoshopped. Government was well aware of the ever-increasing costs of living and the related suffering throughout the rank and file, during the years 2020 and 2021, but opted to make the shameful declaration.

Of course, for its failure to utilize the collective bargaining process, over the one and one-half years in office, the Government proffered another barefaced act of misrepresentation to the peoples of Guyana by claiming that time did not permit them to do so, as though Government had the discretion to determine to, or not to, observe the rule of law.

In fact, Government's scant regard for the rule of law saw them pandering to their political constituents and squandering public resources on political gimmicks, that made no impact on the pain and suffering of the masses, which of course included the Public Servants that suffered throughout the years 2020 and 2021 without any meaningful cushion to the severe economic impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and skyrocketing costs. There were no measures to bolster the drought in the increases of salaries for Public Servants, except for a meagre one-off payment of \$25,000 that that was paid late in the year 2020 and then the paltry seven percent (7%) that was foisted on them around Christmas 2021. The Government highhandedness occurred at a time when the much-vaunted Head of State gave a commitment in a press conference to the effect that the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Public Service be meeting with the GPSU to negotiate wages and salaries.

In so doing, Government disregarded, among other things, the Constitution, the rule of law, Parliament ratified International Labour Organization Conventions that are in force, legally binding Collective Labour Agreements and workers' rights that encompassed legitimate, urgent and essential working class matters. Such was the calculated and wicked display of disrespect and disregard that the PPP/C regime imposed upon the hard-working Public Service workforce, in and out of uniform. Government also frustrated all efforts to sit lawfully, professionally and decently with the GPSU to deal with matters relating to increases in wages and salaries. While frustrating the Union's attempts to jumpstart the Collective Bargaining process, Government was simultaneously attempting to undermine the Union by compromising workers' rights and making them vulnerable. The true character of the regime's disregard for democracy, the Constitution and Laws of Guyana became more pellucid, even with false claims of having working class credentials.

Interestingly, Government is on record claiming that the paltry seven percent (7%) was all it could afford for Public Servants. Notwithstanding this claim, the evidence shows that this Government under the guise of termination benefits, doled out \$1.875 billion dollars to 7,500 severed sugar workers, who had already received severance benefits from the APNU/AFC Administration. This hypocrisy is ongoing with Countrywide political gimmickry within PPP/C constituencies,

where, as recent as, week ending April 29, 2022, hefty promises were made involving financial outlays of billions of Guyana dollars, but the cash strapped Public Servants that have consistently been paid starvation wages are not suitably considered.

One cannot overemphasize the disdainful treatment of the hard-working Frontline Workers, including Guyana Revenue Authority (GRA) Staffers, Nurses, Doctors, and other healthcare workers. The daily inputs from these workers benefit the nation significantly, albeit because of their commitment and professionalism, even during the onslaught of the COVID-19 Pandemic. These functionaries were overlooked for COVID-19 risk allowances, even though in the case of GRA the performances consistently exceeded budget targets and those in healthcare worked beyond the call of duty and put their lives, and that of their loved ones, at risk to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the nation.

In the case of the Sweepers/Cleaners, successive Governments for over a decade have not resolved the plight of these necessary workers, who maintain healthy environments for the nation's children. Since November 5, 2013, but retroactive to July 1, 2013, Cabinet took decisions "For the regularization in the recruitment and improvement of conditions of Sweepers/Cleaners employed in relation to Schools," but to date this has not been regularized to alleviate the sufferings of these workers.

The Governments' action seems to be related to political goading and agitation from elements that operate outside the Public Service, who expect and may be given timely rewards. Nonetheless, GPSU does not recognize the baseless imposition of the seven percent (7%) wages and salaries increases, given the methodology and underlying contempt that the Government has shown and is in the process of taking definitive action to remedy the situation.

This current Government also campaigned on a number of promises to the electorate that it will renegotiate the oil and gas contract with EXXON Mobil. However, to date this matter has been ignored to the extent that aspects, such as: (a) the low royalty rate of two percent (2%); and (b) payment of taxes on behalf of the Company, appear sacrosanct. These significant areas that have and are causing revenue hemorrhages from the Country have been topical issues raised by Mr. Glen Lall, owner of the Kaieteur News, which are genuine and merited. Much to the dismay of the populace, the PPP/C Government has been silent and inactive on corrective measures. As if this was not enough, there is also inaction on required audits of EXXON's post 2017 costs, which is refundable by the state of Guyana. The failure to audit these costs, will likely result in losses estimated at billions of Guyana dollars. While the revenue leakages continue unabated, the citizenry of the Country are subjected to paltry low-income remuneration, a regime of high taxation and high costs of living, in keeping with the Government's policy to stifle wages and salary increases for public servants, much to the delight of Government.

The GPSU is again calling on the Office Holders of the Government of Guyana to act in conformity with their individual Oaths of Office in keeping with the Constitution of Guyana to the effect that obligations under the existing legally binding agreement for the Avoidance and Settlement of Disputes, are honoured and appropriate measures instituted to urgently meet with the GPSU to negotiate for increases of wages, salaries and allowances as was formally requested by several GPSU correspondences that culminated on September 16, 2021.

GPSU also renews its call to all Public Servants to work to rule and to effectively convey to Government their displeasures and rejection of the consistent abuses. This is the time for all workers in and out of the Public Service to unite and be prepared to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to put an end to this uncaring unconscionable and ruthless treatment.

To correct the injustices meted out, the GPSU must consolidate its efforts through a unified front to challenge the sources of these discriminatory acts, so as to lay bare the obstacles to fairness, justice and human rights. The GPSU is confident that with the use of new technology to efficiently and effectively communicate and mobilise, the GPSU in time, through militancy and solidarity, will advance its cause and prove effective in dislodging the Executive's political assaults on the pillars of good governance and the rights of the Nation, which of course includes Public Servants, their families and friends.

Members of the GPSU and the rest of the Nation's workforce must take warranted or necessary measures to stay safe from any possible resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Do not let your guards down by putting yourselves at risk.

At this time, it is important and necessary to bring on record the GPSU's solidarity with the workers and peoples of Ukraine, who are presently suffering because of the brutal and unnecessary acts of war visited upon them by the Russian Federation. The Union calls on Russia to immediately cease the offensive and to make reparations to the independent state of Ukraine for the damages and loss of lives. The GPSU is deliberating on how best the Union and its members can contribute to support this worthy cause.

In closing, I take this opportunity to extend best wishes for a happy and safe Labour Day 2022 to all workers and their families on behalf of the Executive Council and staff of the Guyana Public Service Union.

United we stand.

May 1, 2022.