



EMPLOYERS CONSULTATIVE ASSOCIATION OF TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

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PRESS RELEASE

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OWTU proposed strike action reckless!

The Employers Consultative Association of Trinidad and Tobago (ECA) strongly condemns the intended strike action by the OWTU, especially at this time when collaboration and cooperation is of utmost importance, if we are to rebuild what is clearly a fractured and damaged economy. The ECA is of the view that should such action be taken by this significant labour union, it will not only be seen by the majority of right-thinking citizens of as highly irresponsible and reckless, but more importantly, it can be interpreted as a declaration of war against the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago.

The ECA will continue to be a strong proponent for the sanctity of due process, notwithstanding who may be the actors involved. However, the present set of circumstances not only requires, but also demands that good sense prevails if we are serious about building our common future together which requires, at the very least, renewed collective action by all parties to the Tripartite conversation if we are to achieve a better quality of life.

It is without question that these workers play an important role in bringing to bear what is indeed the country's primary income generating resource and by this merit alone, should not be treated disparately. However, a simple comparative analysis would reveal that there are many differences between a Petrotrin employee and those in similar positions in other sectors. In this regard, the simple cry for parity by saying this group of workers should get what the rest of the country got cannot be objectively considered as fair.

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If at no other time in the history of our beloved nation, the ECA is calling on all right-thinking citizens to resist this planned course of action. The facts as presented in the newspaper article of Saturday 31st December, 2016 by the President of Petrotrin, Fitzroy Harewood, needs no further explanation. The cost to the state of an additional TT\$444 million for increased wages will not only be burdensome to an already **unprofitable** and unproductive entity in terms of plant, machinery, and organisational capacity and capabilities, but, in addition, will be a huge burden to taxpayers. Petrotrin only recently acknowledged tax debts of almost 2 billion dollars. Is this an additional responsibility that taxpayers are willing and more importantly, able to bear at this time?

The ECA acknowledges that according to the Industrial Relations Act (IRA), oil and related activities are defined as an Essential Industry, We are of the view, however, that many of the Essential Services relies significantly on this Industry. Mr Roget himself acknowledges this fact by his threat that “this strike will shut down the Country”. We, therefore call on the Minister of Labour who under Section 65(1) of the IRA possesses the power to file an injunction at the Industrial Court, in protection of the national interest, to prevent any threatened or actual strike action. The Court can then determine the matter, which will be deemed to have been referred to the court for determination (Section 65(2)). Instead of demanding wage increases at a time when it is clearly not feasible or responsible to accede to such requests, the ECA renews its call for all stakeholders to consider the prudent approach of reviewing “**total compensation**” as opposed to just “pay increases”. Even more importantly, the focus of Petrotrin needs to be on increasing efficiency and productivity, and reducing its cost of operations, with lower effective staffing numbers. This ultimately allows further negotiations for improved compensation to be linked to performance considerations, resulting in a win-win for all parties involved.

Increasing these wages can be considered a short-term victory for these workers but as taxpayers, indeed, as a nation, can we support a course of action that can further derail our efforts at recovery and stabilisation? Can we risk the livelihood of 4000 plus workers

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in the medium and long-term if staff cuts become necessary to ensure the continued existence of this important state enterprise? And what of peripheral workers on contract arrangements? **Is this truly collective bargaining?**

At the very least, let us recall the lessons learnt from the infamous 90-day strike at Trinidad Cement Limited in 2012, headed by Mr. Roget himself, which led to widespread and crippling effects across many sectors and which many commentators described as unnecessary.

The final verdict lies with the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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