

60 years of Trade Unions

By [Dr. Lennox Honychurch](#)

The Dominica Trade Union, the first Trade Union to be founded in Dominica, marks its 60th Anniversary this coming week. It was established on 11 January 1945 and thereby marks the beginning of Trade Union activity in Dominica, since all of the present unions branched off from the DTU and its offshoots at one time or another.

The origin of the DTU dates back to the 1930s when the British colonies in the Caribbean were experiencing an economic crisis that had its roots in the Great Depression affecting the economies of North America and Europe. This in turn affected world trade and the Caribbean markets for sugar and other crops. The workers of the islands suffered as they were put out of work and were left destitute without systems of support or compensation.

INQUIRY

Protest, demonstrations and riots swept the colonies, particularly Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, British Guiana, St.Kitts, Antigua and St.Lucia. Most were put down with a firm hand by a combination of the local police and marines serving with ships of the Royal Navy. When the British Government realized that something had to be done to alleviate the situation in the region, it sent out a commission of enquiry to investigate and advise on solutions to the problems.

In Dominica by contrast, there was no sugar industry and few big employers and there was lots of land available for the planting of gardens as well as other natural resources for self-sufficiency. There was no upheaval here. However, when the West Indies Commission under the chairmanship of Lord Moyne visited Dominica to enquire into conditions here, its report stated: 'Of all the British West Indian islands, Dominica presents the most striking contrast between the great poverty of a large proportion of the population, particularly in Roseau, the capital, and the beauty and fertility of the island'.

E.C.LOBLACK

Among the members of the Moyne Commission was the future Lord Citrine who encouraged the leaders of the workers in the region to form Trade Unions. This was to organise the people and solve the problems of low pay, unregulated conditions of work, lack of compensation and an absence of other support services. When the commission visited Dominica in late 1938 it met persons such as Ralph Nicholls and Emanuel Christopher Loblack who took them into the slum areas of Roseau and showed them the appalling conditions in the back of areas such as The Pound, Fond Mico, Derrier La Resin and other similar parts of the town. There were complaints about the lack of legislation to protect agricultural tenants on estates. Lord Citrine

recommended the formation of a union to help deal with these issues but it took another six years before some action was taken.

What precipitated it, according to E.C. Loblack, was a situation at Bath Estate lime factory surrounding the injury of a woman in the machinery who had no recourse to any support for medical care, compensation or sickness benefit, unheard of in those days. Lacking the necessary influence, Loblack went to the Legislative Council, then in session, and called on Ralph Nicholls and Austin 'Pappy' Winston to see what they could do. Together they set in motion the formation of a union, with Nicholls as President and Loblack as General Secretary.

With no factories and few large employers, the union's first concern was among agricultural labourers, tenant farmers, port workers and domestics. The DTU grew rapidly and within six months there were 26 branches around the island. It purchased its own property in Roseau and the DTU Hall on Independence Street, continues to be a bastion of free political speech for all parties.

SPLITS

There were, however, soon schisms within the leadership of the DTU and as the importance of the port and the banana industry developed in the 1950s and 1960s certain factions split off to represent those interests. In December 1960, a former DTU executive member, Anthony Frederick Joseph, split to form the Dominica Banana Employees Association, later to become the Dominica Amalgamated Workers Union (DAWU), from which Rawlins Jemmott split off to form the National Workers Union (NWU). In January 1965, the port workers broke away to form the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Union, later to become the Waterfront and Allied Workers Union (WAWU) under the leadership of Patrick John and Arnold Active.

During the decade of political strife in the 1970s, these unions, coupled with the Civil Service Association, (which has a history of its own), showed their muscle by activating their membership and shaking governments. The firm hand of government in the 1980s and declining economic conditions in the 1990s have tamed the vitality of the unions somewhat. But the ideals of 60 years ago of protecting and supporting the worker continues as a new generation of union leaders adapt to the changed circumstances of the work environment of Dominica.

Thank You.

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