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**“Forever Indebted to Women: The Contribution of Women in the
Development of the Caribbean Labour Movement”**

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Good evening sisters and brothers, it is a great honour for me to have been invited to address you as part of this lecture series. I want to congratulate the University of the West Indies, Hugh Lawson Shearer Trade Union Education Centre for organising this series, as a follow on to an earlier series on Caribbean men. In giving this lecture I join a distinguished line of presenters including – Prof. Rex Nettleford, Vice Chancellor Emeritus of the University of the West Indies; the Honourable Madame Justice Desiree Bernard, Judge of the Caribbean Court of Justice; Professor Julie Meeks-Gardner Director of the Consortium for Social Development and Research of the UWI Open Campus and Ms June Ann Castello of the Centre for Gender and Development Studies of the UWI Mona Campus.

This evening I pay homage to the labour activists of the English-speaking Caribbean. Those women and men who through their actions in the streets, in organisations and at the workplace facilitated changes and improvements in the conditions of work and remuneration for many of us although a great deal still needs to be done. I use as my starting point for this lecture, the 1926 British West Indies and British Guiana Labour Conference which was held in Georgetown, Guyana. That conference marked in many ways the birth of the Caribbean labour movement, a movement which had started possibly as soon as the slave system had ended and ex-slaves took up new positions as wage-labourers and artisans. It was organised in Georgetown, in the then British Guiana by Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow and attended by the leading labour leaders of the period including – Captain Cipriani and W Howard Bishop of Trinidad and Tobago, T. A. Marryshow of Grenada who was elected president; Grantley Adams; Vivian Henry and Richard Hart (Taylor, 2008)ⁱ. What was noteworthy however was that there were no women in attendance. In 2006 however, when I addressed the 80th Anniversary commemorative Conference in Georgetown, the situation was quite different. There were numerous women in attendance, although still not many in the leadership.

The 1920s was in some ways similar to our current period. It was the period of economic depression between the two world wars; a period when the traditional economic staple sugar as it is today, (and as with bananas) was facing serious competition from free trade. There were also the worldwide economic difficulties resulting from the wartime situation -

high unemployment and an absence of social programmes to support the poor and the disadvantaged. This was also a period of economic liberalism when the concern of the colonial government as many of our governments today was to facilitate the profit-making of the private sector.

The 1929 Colonial Development and Welfare Act for example, was based on the principle that “colonies should have only such services as they could afford from their own private revenue (Wicker, 1958:172; Johnson, 1978:268). It had made available the sum of one million pounds for the entire British West Indies and British Guiana but this sum was to be dispersed in loans or grants, only to be spent on capital projects of an ‘economic’ read profit making nature – that is excluding any spending on ‘social’ services including health and education (CO, 1955:74). It would take the combined impact of the labour disturbances of the 1930s throughout the region, the installation of the Labour government in Britain and the emergence of Keynesian economics to cause a shift in policy in 1940-45 with the new Colonial and Development Welfare Act of 1940 (Reddock, 1994:213).

In other ways it was very different from the current period. In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 in the then Soviet Union, many answered the call for international working-class unity. There was also growing resistance to race and colour discrimination reflected in the revolt of the returning British West Indian Soldiers and the alliances between the labour movement and the Garvey Movement (UNIA) at this time. There was also the sustained mobilization of the poor, unemployed and the working classes of this period although formal trade union legislation had not yet been passed (Reddock, 1994:121-122). Despite the non-legality of trade unions this was a period of great working-class consciousness, organisation and mobilisation.

This was true for women *and* for men although for decades, Caribbean labour history as all labour history internationally, was characterised by a glaring invisibility of women. Up to three decades ago, students of history of this region may have been able to safely conclude that women’s contribution to the regional labour movement had been minimal; indeed they would have also questioned the extent to which women, with few exceptions had been workers in the past at all. Indeed in an interview which I carried out recently, a young journalist credited contemporary globalisation and the international media for encouraging Caribbean women to work outside the home (Reddock, 2003).

Before going any further it is necessary for me to define what I mean by the term - labour movement and to distinguish it from the term - trade union movement. By labour movement I refer to the collective struggles of working peoples for better working and living conditions. In the early 20th century this took place in working men’s associations, but also in the early labour associations and unions, which emerged before trade unions were legally recognised. These organisations were responsible for many of the movements and struggles that took place in our region before the 1940s. This would also include the spontaneous labour revolts which emerged in the region to varying degrees in the late 19th Century, 1919 – early 1920s and the 1930s,

In many ways the introduction of formal, institutionalised and 'responsible' trade unionism within this region in the aftermath of the labour disturbances of the 1930s contributed a great deal towards the reduction in the radical potential of this movement as well as of some of the 'labour' governments that it spawned, but of more relevance to this presentation, I argue that "responsible" trade unionism unlike its predecessors resulted in an increased marginalization of women in the regional labour movement along with their potential for its influence. The term labour movement to me therefore includes but goes beyond the trade union movement and beyond the limitations of accepted trade union practice. In other words we need to remember that the labour movement in the Caribbean existed prior to the introduction of formal Trade Unions incorporating many who today are not included in trade union membership.

The discussion so far may seem like a digression away from the main focus of my presentation today – Forever Indebted to Women: the Contribution of Women to the Development of the Labour Movement in the Caribbean. I hope that as it proceeds however the links between these introductory comments and the rest of subject at hand becomes clearer.

Women's Work and Labour in the Caribbean – A Historical perspective.

It was for work that the majority of women as with the majority of men were brought to this region. The majority came as enslaved or indentured labourers and while the majority of these were from the African continent and Indian sub-continent, it is worthwhile remembering that among the indentured were Chinese, Madeiran Portuguese and even poor whites in 17th Century Jamaica and Barbados. Additionally the *encomienda* and *repartamiento* labour systems which were established to exploit the labour of the indigenous peoples were in many ways precursors of slavery.

This labour was not self-realizing labour but work under virtually non-human conditions which our ancestors through their own efforts sought to humanize. The only housewives in this region for many centuries therefore were the minority of white women, wives of plantation owners who accompanied their husbands. But these were few as the English-speaking Caribbean was not a region of settlement but rather one of extraction. Few wives were based here. Among the few who did come we do have testimonies of their experiences, reflecting the interests and prejudices of their station – examples of these include – *Lady Nugent's Journal* – about Jamaica and Mrs A.C Carmichael – *Domestic Manners and Social Conditions of the White, Coloured and Negro Population of the West Indies* on St. Vincent and Trinidad. With the exception of *The Diary of Mary Prince*, we have little self-recording of the experience of slave or indentured women of the region. By the 19th Century housewives may also have been the wives of colonial officials, although as with the women mentioned earlier most of their labour may have been to coordinate the work carried out by the plethora of household servants at their disposal.

Despite this history however, there is a strongly held myth that in the past, long ago, long time – women used to stay at home and take care of children. This may have been true of other regions but it definitely was not the case in this one. Yet the ideology that this is as it

should be and indeed this is how it was, was strongly perpetuated by colonial domestic ideology through religious institutions, schools, 20th Century labour legislation and changes in the sexual division of labour by the mid-20th century. Domestic ideology i.e. the view that women's place is in the home as a dependent housewife and men's role is that of a breadwinner and provider, has always had an important impact on women's work experience and their legitimacy in the workplace. As a result policy towards women's waged and un-waged work could be adjusted to suit the changing needs of capital. As noted by Bridget Brereton:

Antislavery activists, clergymen, officials and British policymakers all shared a basic assumption: the ex-slaves should model their domestic lives on the middle class Western family. Husbands should be the head of the family, the main breadwinner, responsible for family support and endowed with authority over wives and children; wives should be dependent and domestic. Of course lifelong monogamy based on Christian marriage should be the norm (Brereton,1999:102)

Feminist scholars of labour in the late 20th Century questioned the notion that capitalism or westernisation had 'freed' women from household drudgery and 'liberated' them by providing opportunities for work outside of the home. The post-slavery Caribbean provided a good example of the opportunistic manipulation of notions of 'worker' and 'housewife'. Caribbean women, although, descendents of slaves and indentured labourers brought to the region for work on plantations, were subject to state policy and employment practice based on the assumption that they were not 'real workers' (Reddock, 1994).²

This ideology could be and still is manipulated when needed and ignored when not but always serving to de-legitimise and weaken women's position as worker; to open them to accusations of robbing men of jobs which are rightfully theirs and of neglecting the household and most importantly children which is perceived as their primary responsibility. Last year I concluded a study for the International Labour Organisation prepared jointly with Dr. Yvonne Bobb-Smith and we observed the strong feelings of guilt felt by women workers today, and the impact which this had on them as they sought to 'reconcile" their family responsibilities with their work responsibilities. What became clear to us was the assumption by employers, teachers, the state, male partners and fathers, trade unions, policy makers etc. that women had a responsibility to make these things come together i.e. work and family in what ever way they needed to. The state therefore still does not accept the collective responsibility of the society for children and for supporting parents. Even in this period when parents are so seriously challenged. This continues to be a major unacknowledged problem in our midst.

It should not be surprising therefore that with the abolition of slavery, ex-slave women were automatically paid less than men although during slavery they had a higher survival rate than men in the harsh plantation labour. For it is in the fields that the majority of women worked, not in the house as is commonly believed. Similarly, Indian Indentured women in Trinidad and elsewhere, throughout the period were paid children's wages of under 25 cents (the minimum for men) while men could earn up to 40, 50 or 60 cents for

similar work. These discrepancies were possible because women were perceived not to be real workers but as less able-bodied workers and not as breadwinners or providers.

For the majority of women in the early 20th century however, earning a living was a normal way of life, many were also breadwinners and providers for their households. As the century progressed they were eventually made to feel that this was something to be ashamed of – i.e. you didn't have a man to mind you or your man couldn't afford to mind you...or in the case of Indo-Caribbean men, with new attempts to re-establish male patriarchal authority, a secluded wife i.e. one who did not work outside the home was a symbol of higher caste and class status, something which was highly desired and the reason for migration to a new society. In both these cases we see that men's status as men was closely related to the situation of their women - the degree to which they were independent, autonomous or not directly under their control. The reality was however that most working-class, Indo-Caribbean and Afro -Caribbean women continued to work in agricultural plots in farming and market gardening or in urban areas as petty traders and service workers even when they did not become wage-workers.

This situation was compounded by the 1930s with the continuing decline of agriculture and the introduction of mechanisation, which had the effect of removing thousands of women from the workforce. Also in the 1930s new labour legislation was passed preventing educated (middle-class) married women from permanent employment in the civil service or as teachers. Writing in 1950, St. Lucian economist and nobel laureate W. Arthur Lewis recorded the situation in these words:

In the first place, women have retired from employment into the home. Thus in Jamaica, the ratio of gainfully occupied women to total number of women between the ages of 15-60 has declined from 78 percent in 1911 to 50 percent in 1943. The same thing has happened elsewhere, for example in the Leeward Islands where the proportion of gainfully occupied women to women of 10 years and over declined from 73 percent in 1891 to 48 percent in 1946 (Lewis,1950:3)

But this retirement was not done voluntarily and was something which was continuously resisted up to the present. The general definition of women as housewives meant that their work within the home was naturalized and not valued. Their work outside the home, by extension, was seen as secondary, temporary, complementary and therefore did not need to be fully remunerated and could be ended when no longer necessary.

Women, Labour Struggles and the Labour Movement

According to Lucille Mathurin-Mair, extended breast-feeding was used by slave women to extend leisure hours and resist massa's work in the last decades of the slave system. This was in a period where intensive efforts were being made to encourage local childbearing and child rearing after the 1807 abolition of the slave trade. This was just one of the many unorthodox means of resistance which were used during slavery, in addition to the more celebrated slave revolts in which women were also involved. In the post-emancipation period, many of these 'maternal allowances and privileges' were removed, yet women

continued to resist planters' demands for slave-like labour from themselves and their children (Mathurin-Mair,1998:25).

Women were also part of the more overt and confrontational forms of labour organisation and struggles although they did not become part of the formal leadership of the labour movement until the 1970s or 1980s in some parts of the region. As an early scholar of Caribbean women's labour history, trying to piece together a coherent body of work – a piece here, a piece there, I soon learnt that it was during periods of disturbances, street protests, and strikes that women would become most visible in the historical records. Indeed in Walter Rodney's *History of the Guyanese Working People* the index cites one entry under women – Women – Riots pp.205-207. It was in the reports of the Commissions of Enquiry into these events that women would come alive and jump off the page. In other records and at other times it was more difficult. One other factor which I found made women's contribution invisible was the connotations inherent in the work 'worker'. Worker like 'farmer' and a number of similar nouns are often assumed to be male. One would need a clear understanding of the sexual division of labour in order to recognise women's involvement in many of these struggles as they may not have been specifically mentioned.

From the inception of 'wage-labour' in the Caribbean, women workers have attempted to organise. Prior to the 1940s this meant organisation as self-employed, artisans, petty producers, traders, domestics as well as the unemployed. As early as 22, July 1844, six hundred workers and small producers, women and men met in Couva in Central Trinidad to form the Trinidad Free-Labourers Society (Ramdin, 1982:123). By the late 19th century labour disturbances occurred throughout the region - a response to the economic depression of this period resulting in the 1897 Labour Disturbances Commission. Nigel Bolland reports that in Jamaica on 8, June 1894 "soldiers, joined by women and men of the town attacked two police stations and roughed up the police at Fletcher's Land and Sutton Street (Bolland, 2001:175). Similarly in St. Georges, Grenada, "Several hundred men and women attacked the police with rocks, sticks and bottles, some were imprisoned for up to three months (Bolland,2001:177)¹ In the 1905 disturbances in Guyana, Rodney notes that of the 105 persons convicted in the Georgetown Magistrates Court as a consequence of the 1905 Riots, 41 were female. He surmises that it would well be that at least one in three "rioters" was a woman, a credible reason being the large proportion of women in the city of Georgetown at the time (Rodney,1981:206). He notes further that in the stevedores strikes of 1905 women domestics took to the streets and even attacked other women who did not support the strike (Rodney, 1982:206).

From the above we can conclude that the majority of women participating in the protests, riots and disturbances of the early 20th century were workers or self-employed traders or artisans. These ranged from workers on sugar estates to domestic workers in urban areas and in the "oilfields"; factory workers, barmaids, store clerks, food packers, seamstresses or dressmakers. In addition to the difficulties of increased prices, low wages and poor

¹ While these two extracts reflect women's participation in these struggles, most of the other reports do not mention them.

working conditions, increasing unemployment was a key factor. It moved these women, as it did the men, to action. But for women, many of them cognizant of their responsibility for their children, the issues were extremely clear.

Early Workingmen's Associations were formed in many parts of the region, comprising mainly male artisans most of whom would have been self-employed. Bolland also reminds us that many of the early organisations describing themselves as 'unions' involved skilled artisans and not wage labourers to which the term 'unions' would later be confined. Indeed this reflects the origins of the trade unions in the earlier crafts or trades unions, descendents of the medieval guilds which were combinations of tradesmen for the protection of their craft. In Jamaica the Carpenters, Bricklayers and Painters Union was formed in 1898 and later became the Artisans Union which went on to form the Tailors and Shoemakers Union in 1901. As noted by French and Ford-Smith:

This union organised craftsmen to determine levels of hierarchy within their trades and to press for the recognition of a schedule of rates for the various interests of the skilled. The union therefore centred on the interests of skilled male tradesmen, the majority of whom were not employed to factories on either a regular or full-time basis, but worked as 'journeymen' hired for specific jobs or specific contract from time to time (French and Ford-Smith, 1985:260).

Even though the cigar makers or tobacco workers comprised a significant number of female workers these women were not the focus of the Union's concerns (French and Ford-Smith, 1985:260-261). This was just one of a number of different forms through which workers were organized during this period. In Trinidad and Tobago the early Workingmen's Association was transformed in 1918 into the more radical Trinidad Workingmen's Association.

After the late 19th Century labour disturbances in the region, three other clear periods of labour unrest could be discerned in the 20th Century – 1918-1919; 1934-1938 and 1946-1947. Between 1900 and 1938 in Trinidad, there were three major labour disturbances – the 1903 Water Riots, the 1919 Labour Disturbances and Strikes, and the more well-known Labour Disturbances and Strikes between 1934 and 1937. Already we see a pattern that was to continue into the 20th Century, one of women's participation in protests, demonstrations and street actions but excluded from the organisations and structures which were to emerge in their aftermath. Indeed in preparation for the 1937 strikes in Trinidad and Tobago, Tubal Uriah Butler organised a Women's Committee to prepare meals and deliver them to the strikers. The unfolding of events however were quite different and saw women taking on roles quite different from those anticipated by their labour leader (T&T Archives, Uriah Butler papers cited in Reddock, 2005:29-30).

The labour disturbances and strikes of the early 20th century were part of a wider ferment taking place in the Caribbean region. In Trinidad in 1919, the militant TWA led by Alfred Richards, was involved in what is known as the stevedores strike. This strike involved stevedores, and lightermen who worked on the docks, but according to Jim Barrette, first

president of the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Union this strike also involved the women coal carriers of the Archer Coaling Company who declared their intention to participate actively in the strike (Ramdin,1982:57).

Although a minority of the waterfront working population, women were active participants in the street protests and riots that accompanied the strike. Witness statements in the confidential Report into the Conduct of the Constabulary during the Labour Disturbances, suggests that women and their children comprised a large number of those supporting the strike. In five out of six quotations describing the crowd the common characteristics were - that they comprised a "low class of people" and the involvement of women. The following are five of the seven statements describing the crowd:

- a mob of 40 to 50, composed of boys, youths, a few girls and women and about three or four men;
- a howling mob; there were men, women and children and young boys, but there were more men of the class who work on the wharf – stevedores, flatmen, boatmen etc. The women very likely were the coal-carrier type of women'
- the crowd were the worst scum of Port of Spain he had ever seen, accompanied by a large number of very rowdy and shouting women, and even more rowdy boys...
- the greater part of the crowd were rowdy women and boys;
- A lot of bad prostitutes egging the men on to smash and break windows, while some of the crowd started to shout "Heave" (Report on the Constabulary, 1919:58-59).

In addition to this, a secret despatch from then governor J.R. Chancellor to the Colonial Office on the disturbances reported that one Albertha Husbands, the Barbadian head of the Domestics Section of the TAW had plans to organise a strike of cooks and house servants and was advocating the use of poison by domestics in the households of employers (CO295/527, No. 17716). After the strike, Husbands was one of a number of Caribbean labour activists resident in Trinidad threatened with deportation. In Jamaica as well, strikes, protests and riots broke out in 1918 and 1919 in urban and rural areas. As in Trinidad, women coal carriers went on strike, but also women banana carriers, women employees at the Match Factory, French and Ford-Smith note that: "In the city too, women were active. At the Match Factory, where the majority of workers were women, workers refused to return to work without an increase in wages after 2 months of unemployment." they continue:

In 1918, when women workers began their struggles, their tactics drew on the tradition of spontaneous strike and direct negotiation, which had been part of the tradition of protest since the Baptist wave and before. Women led their own independent action; for example, striking coal carriers in June 1918 refused a wage offer, which they thought too low. When the government brought in prisoners to break the strike, the women retaliated by marching from the docks to Kings House to lay their grievance before the Governor himself (French and Ford-Smith, 1984:265).

Interestingly according to French and Ford-Smith, newspaper reports described the women as being more stubborn than men in demanding and sticking to their claim. *In addition, they also sent a delegation to the newspaper to contradict statements made about them* (*The Gleaner*, 20.6.1918 cited in French and Ford-Smith, 1984:265.)

The next period of disturbances, protests and riots of the 1930s however, were most significant in that they contributed to a major change in British colonial policy towards the region. Yet I want to stress that the 1930s was part of a continuous tradition of struggle which lasted for most of the period up to the 1940s with the introduction of 'responsible trade unionism.' The predominantly Indian sugar workers in central Trinidad staged the first of the 1930s disturbances in 1934 with Indian women taking a major role in challenging the estate authorities and demanding economic justice. This was followed by protests by workers in Belize where according to Bolland on 29, September 1934 about 300 men and women, armed with sticks, went to the Belize Town Board (Bolland, 1992:265). These were followed by other disturbances in, St. Kitts, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, and British Guiana in 1935; in St. Lucia, Barbados and Trinidad in 1937, and in Jamaica in 1938. A detailed examination of the labour disturbances of the 1930s as I have done elsewhere reflect a similar situation, a heavy involvement of women in these events but not in the organisational and institutional structures that emerged thereafter (See Reddock.2005: Bolland, 1988:265)).

The changes in colonial policy in the aftermath of the 1930s disturbances, and the recommendations of the Commissions of Enquiry such as the West Indian Royal Commission (WIRC) which followed, had the following components -- reducing worker militancy through the introduction of 'responsible trade unionism'; strengthening and introducing new state-sponsored social welfare programmes as a response to the social and economic dislocations taking place; and the re-defining of women as dependent housewives. By emphasising women's location within 'the family' through for example the new Women's Welfare programmes of the Social Welfare Divisions of the colonial governments, they were by extension no longer seen as an integral part of the wage-labouring population and the labour movement (Reddock, 1984).⁷

The broad and more inclusive structures of membership of the early labour organisations facilitated women's participation in ways that the more formalised trade unions could not. The Cipriani-led Trinidad Workingmen's Association of the 1920s for example, was organised into occupational sections which included – seamstresses, domestics, stevedores, fishermen, labourers, porters, clerks and casual and general labourers. In addition there were also regional sections and women's sections. In other words there were many opportunities for women to become affiliated to the organisation. Notions of worker at this time incorporated virtually everyone and facilitated large-scale mobilization. At the height of the TWA's operations in 1927, around the time of this conference there were two women's sections in Port of Spain – Women's Section No. 1 led by Eldica Alkins, a Barbadian milliner, The Domestics Section or Women's Section No. 2 and in 1930 a third Women's Section was organised by Theresa Ojoe also in Port of Spain.

In September 1929, *The Labour Leader*, newspaper of the labour movement in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1920s, reported that “owing to the great increase in membership of the California section the female members resolved to work separately and in consequence officers were elected last Sunday for that purpose.” Henrietta Waldron was elected president. In 1934, the San Fernando Women’s Section was started with Mrs L. Wiltshire as president (Reddock, 1994:126). The TWA also had a Youth League, Thelma Williams later of the OWTU, recalled her membership as a child. But in addition many of the earliest attempts at union organisation took place in sectors with large female employment such as the store clerks and shop assistants of Port of Spain in the Union of Shop Assistants and Clerks and the Banana carriers and barmaids of Jamaica in the Longshoremen’s Union. As late as the 1940s Daisy Crick, a housewife, was a member of the executive of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union of Trinidad and Tobago.

In Jamaica, French and Ford-Smith note the conscious efforts of Bain Alves of the Longshoremen’s Union No. 1 and later the Jamaican Federation of Labour to organise women workers in the early 20th Century. He organised women banana carriers, coal carriers, tramway and railway workers, storemen, and predominantly female hotel workers and barmaids initially through the longshoremen’s Union. By the 1920s women workers were most likely a large proportion of the members of the banana carriers, coal carriers and the Barmen, Barmaid and Hotel Workers Unions which formed part of the Jamaican Federation of Labour which he registered in 1922 some meetings were organised after 9.00 p.m. in order to accommodate the late working hours of the barmaids. (French and Ford-Smith, 1985:271).

But women workers were not only the beneficiaries of male labour organisers, some contributed in their own right to the building of labour organisations. In Trinidad and Tobago I have identified Helena Manuel and Elma Francois but I am sure that similar women existed in other territories. What is interesting though is that none of these women was mainstream enough or important enough to be invited to the 1926 conference. Indeed even as we marvel at these early brave women who contributed to the development of this movement we should not underestimate the limitations and constraints that still affected most women especially working-class women at this time. Indeed it was working class women who were involved in these movements. Few middle or upper class women could afford to be identified with the indignities of the labour movement and its street activity. Middle class and more educated women of this period were limited mainly to social work which was important as the state was not contributing in this area, and which was considered more befitting of a lady.² There were some exceptions however, for example Beatrice Greig, a white women’s movement activist was a member of the TWA and active in its operations (Reddock, 1994).

Helena Manuel, for example, in 1928, broke away from Cipriani’s TWA to form the Trinidad Cocoa Planters and Labouring Classes Association. Her attempts to have it affiliated to the International Federation of Trade Unions failed as she had to go through the national body

² In 1936 the First Conference of British Guiana and British West Indies Women Social Workers was held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and hosted by Audrey Jeffers and the Coterie of Social Workers.

– Cipriani's TWA. In 1929, together with Hubert Carrington she formed the Trinidad and Tobago National Trade Union Centre, an umbrella union including all types of labourers (Ramdin, 1982:72). In 1930 it had 2,000 members primarily workers involved in transport (Lewis, 1977: 27).

Similarly Elma Francois, Vincentian domestic who had migrated to Trinidad, also broke away from Cipriani's TWA and together with Jim Barrette, Christina King, Bertie Percival, Jim Headley and others formed first the National Unemployed Movement(NUM) in early 1934 which morphed into the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (NWCSA), a Marxist-oriented organisation at the end of 1934. Her organisation working among the poor and working class in urban Port of Spain, rural central Trinidad and in industrial South Trinidad and despite its name, worked among both the predominantly African urban workers and the Indian workers on the estates of central Trinidad. Members Jim Barrette and Christina King recall working with one Pulbassie a sugar worker activist whom they dubbed – Lady Naidoo after the Indian independence activist. The NWCSA was responsible for the formation of three of the trade unions of the 1930s and 1940s two of which continue to exist today. These are the Seamen and Waterfront Workers Trade Union, the Public Works and Public Service Workers Union and the Federated Workers Union now part of the National Government and Federated Workers Union. Additionally, according to Christina King one of the organisations's founding members – Clement Payne was sent to Barbados in 1937 to support the workers struggle in that country.

Despite this early history of labour movement participation in this region, based on her studies of women trade unionists in the late 1970s Lynn Bolles could still conclude that:

Although women played central and critical roles as providers of organizational and ideological leadership [they] remained invisible, undervalued and were not even relegated to the footnotes in the official narratives and in the majority of academic works on the subject. Basically, women members of organized labour were formally made invisible...The emergence of feminist scholarship both in the region and by North American colleagues made it possible to examine one of the region's significant institutions from a gender perspective (Bolles,2005:88).

It should be noted that this was true both for the unions associated with the Caribbean Congress of Labour as well as the more socialist-oriented unions of the region not affiliated to the CCL. In the 1980s The Project for the Development of Caribbean Women in Trade Unions (1982-1985)³ sought to develop skills and knowledge of communication, negotiation and collective bargaining, labour history, sociology and the economy. By the end of the project in 1984 according to Bolles (2005) 16,000 women had taken part in national and regional seminars which had taken place in The Bahamas, St. Kitts, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia and Barbados (Bolles, 2005:93). I dare say that some of the women who were part of this process may be in this room right now.

³ This project was organised by the Women and Development Unit of the UWI School of Continuing Studies, in collaboration with the ILO, CCL, DANIDA, L/O Norway and the Inter-American Foundation (Bolles,2005:93).

Bolles suggests that since the 1990s, many women trade unionists have become presidents, general secretaries, deputy general secretaries, heads of departments and heads of labour institutions and the International Labour Organisation has a strong commitment to gender equity (Bolles,2005:93). Indeed the current president of the Caribbean Congress of labour Comrade Jacqueline Jack was a participant in this training programme.

It should be noted that in Trinidad and Tobago, for example that Ursula Gittens served as president of the Civil Service Association even before this time and Jennifer Baptiste-Primus now serves as president of its successor organisation – the Public Services Association. Yet it is true to say that the Caribbean labour movement is still securely under the control of a male leadership and reflects many of the class, gender and race and ethnic contradictions of our region. The culture and traditions of the movement continues to be very masculine and indeed many issues of special concern to women members with few exceptions still receive limited attention. In her 1985 research paper for the Cipriani Labour College, entitled “Women in Trade Unions: A comparative Survey in Trinidad and Tobago,” Jennifer Baptiste, now president of the Public Service Association revealed that the low level of female leadership within the unions in Trinidad and Tobago was due to: the general effect of the male dominated society and a lack of self confidence and assertiveness among women (Baptiste,1985).

But while attempts to increase women’s leadership in traditional labour organizations continues to be elusive, we must be aware of alternative and innovative forms of labour organisation and labour movement work, which have emerged in the region which have perhaps been ignored by the mainstream movement. *For it is not enough simply to have women as leaders we also need to be open to the new approaches, insights and issues that they may bring to the fore.* One example of this is the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) of Trinidad and Tobago and I am sure that there are other examples in the region. From its inception in 1983, the National Union of Domestic Employees (NUDE) has shown its dynamism, adaptability and responsiveness to change both locally and internationally. It’s former President, the late Clotil Walcott and General Secretary Ida Le Blanc are part of the first and only all female executive of a trade union.

Since its inception NUDE waged successful campaigns for legislation to improve the status of domestic and other low-wage workers and has been at the forefront of the campaign for increases to the minimum wage and for amendments to the Minimum Wage Act. In 1990, NUDE became the local representative of the International Wages for Housework Campaign. After years of lobbying, letter writing and other actions, a bill to count women’s unwaged work was tabled in parliament by independent senator Diana Mahabir Wyatt. In 1995 the Unremunerated Work Act was passed in parliament making Trinidad and Tobago one of the few countries in the world to pass such legislation. The language of this Act was used as a model for deliberations at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing China in 1995 and inclusion in the Platform for Action approved by delegates. In 2005, for the first time, the Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical office began making available data collected on unremunerated work (Reddock, 2005b).

Conclusions

In periods of economic crisis, such as in the 1920s-30s or as we are experiencing today, the restructuring of relations between labour and capital, is an important mechanism used to counter the falling rate of profit. In the then British Caribbean, especially in the period of 1921 through the 1930s, this took the form of: an overall reduction in the labour force, especially in agriculture; the industrialisation of many artisan and own-account operations such as dressmaking, the expulsion of women from the labour force and the increase in the rate of exploitation through longer working hours, larger tasks etc. The actions taken by women workers and working people generally during such times are aimed at constraining the impact of this trend. And in this they have varying degrees of success.

In our current context of economic liberalism although this is now under some threat, there is little discussion of work and labour and the context of worker's struggles and organisation in the English-speaking Caribbean. Any discussion of labour or work is now incorporated into a discourse on human resource management or social capital. Through the processes of globalisation and economic neo-liberalism, many trade unions are weaker today and have been unable to come up with new and creative strategies to address the new situations that emerge and capture the imagination of a new generation of workers. Some of the criticisms of trade unions have been their lack of vision, 'living in the past,' non-acceptance of changes in the international environment, unwillingness to try new strategies and refusal to frontally address issues of gender in their work programmes and analysis.

The women's movement has been one of the more resilient movements to survive the radical period of the 1970s. In my opinion it has survived because of its innovative and creative approaches and its continuous search for greater and greater democracy. At this time however it is facing a serious backlash from those opposed to its fundamental challenges to the status quo. Maybe it is time for a closer collaboration between these two important social movements. In so doing mainstream trade unions must be willing to substantially transform themselves, to re-think accepted modes of doing things encouraging an open climate of innovation, creativity, critical thinking, and dialogue with other social movements. In this context I would like to propose the following actions:

- The re-thinking of notions of membership beyond the traditional categories of 'wage-labour';
- The development of a regional research project documenting the history of women and the labour movement in the region;
- The development of a comprehensive communications campaign to bring the interests and ideas of the movement to a wider audience including young women and young men;
- The broadening of the range of issues addressed by the movement to include for example issues related to reconciling work with family and gender related issues;
- Introducing more creative modalities of operation beyond collective bargaining;

- A review of Human Resource Management curricula in regional educational institutions, making recommendations for the inclusion of the history of the labour movement and industrial development;
- The introduction of gender studies courses into the regional labour education institutions;
- The introduction of special short courses aimed at introducing gender analysis training to trade unionists.

These proposals I suggest could provide a framework to strengthen and renew the movement in order to confront the many global and local challenges that it now faces.

Thank You

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ⁱ <http://www.bigdrumnation.org/notes/labourheroes.htm>