



# FEATURE ADDRESS

delivered by

**Her Honour Mrs. Deborah Thomas-Felix**  
**President, Industrial Court of Trinidad and Tobago**

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at the

National Union of Government and Federated Workers (NUGFW)

2<sup>nd</sup> National Triennial Congress 2018

“FAITHFULNESS TOWARDS CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT”

**SATURDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST, 2018**

**8:00AM**

**CASCADIA HOTEL AND CONFERENCE CENTRE, ST. ANN'S**

Thank you for inviting me to deliver the feature address at your 2<sup>nd</sup> National Triennial Congress. In May this year the National Union of Government and Federated Workers (NUGFW) celebrated 81 years as a trade union in Trinidad and Tobago: in fact the NUGFW existed for some 25 years before this nation became independent of its last colonial master.

The NUGFW has played and continues to play an important and central role in the lives of daily rated employees who work in central government, local government, the Tobago House of Assembly, workers at some Statutory Authorities and some of the workers in the private sector. Indeed, over the course of the last 81 years, the NUGFW has impacted the lives of numerous families in our twin-island republic.

Eighty one years is a long time, I daresay, and as we look back on the history and work of the NUGFW, we see that the union has played a significant role in highlighting and seeking resolution in some key areas in industrial relations.

Among the issues which affected workers at that time and which were handled by unions such as the NUGFW, were issues under the ambit of the Master and Servant Act of 1938 as well as issues arising under the Factories Ordinance of 1946 (as amended by the Factories Act of 1969). It is noteworthy that the Master and Servant Act, which has been regarded as very pro-employer and against the interests of workers, came into effect one year after the NUGFW registered as a trade union in Trinidad and Tobago and this legislation remained in place for decades until it was repealed in 2012.

Fast forward to 2018 and we will no doubt agree that so much has changed for workers over the past 81 years. Trinidad and Tobago has signed onto all the fundamental conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the UN specialised agency tasked with establishing global labour standards and whose remit is ensuring social justice for all.

Moreover, over the past few decades - due in no small part to the advocacy of the unions – workers have been guaranteed freedom of association, maternity protection, minimum

wage protection, equal pay for equal work and social security protection among other key benchmarks of an advanced industrial relations system.

Paradoxically though, there are many issues that continue to bedevil workers and their mere existence suggests the continued importance and relevance of trade unions in the development trajectory of a nation, particularly one such as ours.

Today, issues such as Wages and Cost of Living Allowance (COLA), Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) (similar to the issues addressed by the Factories Ordinance), maintaining maternity protection for pregnant women, protecting workers' rights, retrenchment, the recognition and contribution of domestic workers, the downturn in the economy and socio-economic challenges, continue to be issues affecting workers.

The elephant in the room is of course the issue that continues to wreak havoc on our sense of personal and emotional security and which affects not only workers but employers and all citizens: that issue is the issue of crime and its debilitating effect on our society.

Crime has negatively affected each of us in some way or the other, either from personal experience or by the experience of someone we know. The society has been plagued with violent and non-violent crimes including white collar crime which occurs frequently on unsuspecting and vulnerable citizens at the workplace and away from work.

At the workplace there are pregnant women who are fired because some employers ignore the protection which the law affords these women. There are workers who are retrenched without regard to due process (the Arcelor Mittal debacle comes to mind), there are those workers who are dismissed in most harsh and oppressive circumstances, there are those who are dismissed for asserting their right to strike and of course, the domestic workers who have been engaged in their decades-long fight for equity, justice and safe work environments.

I submit to you my friends, as we as a nation are justifiably proud of the hard work and decades of tireless contribution of our unions, there remains serious work to be done. This work in my view can only be done with the coming together of minds to achieve a common purpose, which is the building of a better Trinidad and Tobago.

Of course, when I speak of coming together this is not limited to the unions; it is important that unions, employers and Government shoulder an equal burden towards nation building. This, after all, is the foundation of the idea of social partners and social dialogue. It also points the way forward with respect to the rules of engagement among all partners concerned with working towards the greater good for this country.

It is within this context that I therefore wish to sound a note of caution; I have noticed, as the wider community has no doubt noted as well, that within recent years we have observed the squabble which seems to be taking place between the union confederations in Trinidad and Tobago.

I want to respectfully suggest, that it is imperative for workers to move beyond the union politics and internecine conflicts which divide them. Instead they should seek to come together, to create a common brotherhood and sisterhood of unity, among all workers and among all unions. This is the only way to tackle the myriad issues and challenges which workers face locally, regionally and internationally in 2018 and beyond.

If I were to take the word “**development**” from your theme, I would say that for there to be sustained economic growth and social development, the role of all workers in Trinidad and Tobago must be regarded as an important and critical factor in that development. This, in addition to a solid legal framework, social dialogue, good governance and the practice of good industrial relations, constitutes the bulwark of equitable, inclusive growth and development for the society. These practices together with the fair and equitable treatment of workers, can make this nation propel from being a nation whose good governance indicators are not where they should be, to one which is based on equity, inclusive growth and good governance. This is fundamental if the role of the workers is to be respected and treated as critical to our nation’s development.

An Aboriginal wise woman once said “If you come only to help me, you can go back home. But if you consider my struggle as part of your struggle for survival, then maybe we can work together.” My struggle is indeed your struggle for survival. We can all agree that there is strength in unity, and it is therefore very important from my perspective for all trade unions to come together and work to develop a symbiotic relationship to properly represent the interests of workers and to work together to assist in developing a better Trinidad and Tobago.

Therefore, what I am really advocating when I speak about strength in unity is social cohesion. I know that some workers want to rally with their union only, to the exclusion of all other unions, and some unions want to stand alone and be independent. But this is not a zero-sum game; supporting your brother and sister in their struggles does not diminish your independence. The success of your trade union is the success of all trade unions and is beneficial to all workers throughout the country.

The strategy of independence is what I have referred to in the past as dissensus. Dissensus is the antithesis of social cohesion. I urge you today to consider strength in unity. Dissensus in the workplace is self-defeating; it does not assist the unions, it does not assist the government and it certainly does not assist the private sector particularly in 2018, a period where despite our advances, we continue to struggle to overcome our current economic and social challenges.

I extend to you warmest congratulations for having the distinction and honour of surviving as a formidable union for 81 years in this twin island republic. I hope that your 2<sup>nd</sup> National Triennial Congress is very successful and it lends clarity for the way forward.

There is a lot of work to be done by NUGFW and other trade unions to ensure that the business of workers is treated as paramount and that all workers including domestic workers have an even share of the national pie. In closing, I am reminded of the timeless lyrics of master composer, Dennis Franklin, the Merchant, who opined that the task of nation-building belongs to all of us; my friends, “come my brother, come my sister, let us build a nation together”.