

BARBADOS UNION OF TEACHERS

32ND Annual General Conference

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

***“QUALITY EDUCATION: PROVIDING SAFE AND HEALTHY
ENVIRONMENTS FOR ALL.”***

April 4, 2006

at

**The Almond Bay Conference Centre,
Hastings, Christ Church
Barbados.**

BY KAREN BEST, JP

PRESIDENT- BARBADOS UNION OF TEACHERS

Master of Ceremonies, Minister of State in the Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs & Sports, Ms. Cynthia Forde, Representative of the Ministry of Labour, General Secretary of CTUSAB, Representatives of sister Trade Unions, former Presidents of the BUT, President of the BSTU, Principals, fellow colleagues, other specially invited guests, ladies and gentlemen.

This 32nd Annual General Meeting of the Barbados Union of Teachers marks a period in the history of the BUT, which can only be described as turbulent, challenging and above all, a time where the method of representation of its members is being questioned.

Over the last twelve (12) months there has been an increase in the number of cases dealing with issues of health and safety. The theme for this conference, "**Quality Education: Providing Safe and Healthy Environments for All,**" is therefore very timely because quality education cannot be achieved if the work environment is neither safe nor healthy.

The Barbados Union of Teachers responded to a number of health and safety issues such as the incursions of rats in schools, nauseating smells, noxious odours, dust pollution, school buildings in various states of disrepair, leaking roofs, lack of proper furniture and equipment, poor lighting and ventilation and of course the increasing acts of violence and indiscipline in schools which threaten the safety of all on the compound.

The BUT again places on record its concern about the level of indiscipline and violence in the school system. The debate about the percentage of students who are involved in the activity is irrelevant in so far as the seriousness of the activity is concerned. The fact that this phenomenon is occurring in schools is just cause for concern and positive action.

Violence in schools takes many different forms:

- (a) derogatory remarks made to teachers and students
- (b) Pupil on pupil violence
- (c) Pupil on teacher violence
- (d) Parent on pupil violence
- (e) Parent on teacher violence
- (f) Bullying

It is difficult, if not impossible to find a single or dominant influence in the search for the cause of violence. Violence is a complex phenomenon and there are many factors that contribute to its development and perpetration. The circumstances and background of those who commit acts of violence, for example, their socioeconomic status, family life and relationships, together with their school, work and community experiences can be significant factors.

The influence of the media and media-based entertainment, such as certain genres of music and the sub-cultures also contribute to the increase in violence. Parents and families are a significant influence on their children's attitudes. Families constitute the training ground for aggression. It is within the family that aggressive behaviours are first learned.

To the extent that families fail to instill non-violent values in their children, those children will be more likely to develop a repertoire of violent behaviours as they negotiate life in society at large (Australian Institute of Criminology, 1990).

The question is, how do we reduce the level of violence and indiscipline in our schools?

From a government and by extension the Ministry of Education's level they must:

1. Recognise and accept that there is a problem of indiscipline which is leading to violence in our schools.
2. An evaluation or an audit must be done on the institutions responsible for enforcing/support discipline in schools. For Example, the Edna Nichols Centre, the Juvenile Liaison Scheme, the Government Industrial Schools for boys and girls namely Summervale and Dodds.
3. Support systems must be allocated to the schools, Example, Guidance Counsellors, Social Workers, and Psychologists.
4. Increase the number of psychologists in the Ministry of Education – at present there is one psychologist to service all the schools. The referral list is long and the waiting list is longer. That department needs resources and more personnel.
5. Legislation which makes parents liable for acts committed by their children damaging school and teachers' property, assaulting teachers.

At the school level administrators and teachers must:

- (a) Enforce the Code of Discipline for all students.
- (b) Have a zero tolerance provision for certain types of offences – such as gambling, smoking, using illegal substances, sexual encounters, assaulting teachers.
- (c) Removal of students who exhibit disturbed mental behaviours from the regular classroom, and place in a separate facility with trained personnel to handle such cases.
- (d) Enforcing/utilization of the Search and Seizure bill – random searches.
- (e) Relationship between the sale and abuse of drugs and student violence.
- (f) Regular meetings about violence in schools should be held to sensitize teachers and present them with coping strategies
- (g) Administrators must provide teachers with accurate and timely information about violent occurrences and the responses to them.
- (h) Discussions should be held in relation to the prevention efforts and concerns of staff.
- (i) Inclusion of the ancillary and support staff in the violence prevention methods. The ancillary staffs see and hear a lot more than teachers.
- (j) Training for teachers to identify students who are at risk of anti-social behaviour or also training in preventive intervention to deal safely with violence, should it erupt and training in conflict resolution.
- (k) Inclusion of positive experiences and use of Community Based Organizations, and Faith Based Organizations in the process.

I suggest that in order for Quality Education to become a reality, then the persons responsible for the delivery of the quality education and the persons responsible for providing the conditions/infrastructure for such must be singing from the same hymn sheet.

Very often the Ministry of Education has difficulty in communicating with the BUT on issues. There seems to be a mind set within the Ministry that the union is the enemy. The question is constantly asked, why do teachers call the union? Let me state for the record that the teachers have the right to call their union. One of the roles of the union is to liaise with the Ministry on behalf of its members.

The concept of the Social Partnership is not only with CTUSAB, the Employers and Government, but with the BUT as well and the Ministry of Education. Too often there is a lack of respect and lack of constant communication. At times I feel like the old Colonial mentality still exists among some technocrats.

I make bold to say that personnel in the Ministry of Education need to be schooled in the basic principles of Industrial and Human Relations Practices. I will cite a recent example.

For three years or more the custom and practice was that the school term ends for the students on the Thursday of the last week and the Friday for the teachers where an evaluation session is done. The Ministry of Education determined that the school term which just ended should finish on the Friday for both students and teachers.

This change was supposed to have been communicated to the schools on March 22, just one day before the end of the term. Obviously some schools received the circular after the closure. How can the Ministry of Education change a policy without consultation with the unions and the stakeholders. Schools would have made plans before hand and would have notified parents. It is mind boggling to determine the rationale or lack thereof of that decision.

Information has been sent to the schools indicating that the length of the school terms for the next Academic Year have been changed; Term 1 – 14 weeks, Term 11 – 14 weeks and Term 3 – 10 weeks. The Barbados Union of Teachers has not been informed as to the reason (s) for this change. One can only assume that this is as a result of the ICC World Cup.

Do you understand the problem now? What is wrong with the Ministry of Education having dialogue with the BUT and other stakeholders on this and other issues.

The BUT wishes to direct the Ministry of Education to Section 75 of the UN's Recommendation Concerning the Status of Teachers and I quote:

"In order that teachers may discharge their responsibilities, authorities should establish and regularly use recognized means of consultation with teachers' organizations on such matters as educational policy, school organization and new developments in the education service".

This leads me to my next point where the BUT states that the time has come for a Human Resource Department to be established within the Ministry of Education. At present the Ministry of Education has a Personnel Department which is :

- highly bureaucratic
- leads to lengthy delays between identification of needs and intervention
- offers solutions which work in artificial or simulated situations, but are difficult to apply in the real day to day work place
- Threatens the relationship between the line manager and the subordinate
- Is reliant on, and perpetuates the mystique of the perceived expertise of personnel specialists rather than focusing on the developments of line manager capability.

With a Human Resource Management approach the following features are emphasized:

- Actions are measured against the strategic objectives of the organization as a whole
- The central importance of the line manager
- Advocate customized, individual responses to intervention
- Focuses on positive motivation rather than negative control
- Uses process rather than standardized procedures
- Being proactive rather than reactive
- Are fully integrated into the day-to-day management of the organization
- Encourages purposeful negotiation and the resolution of potential conflict between managers and managed.

The HMR theory/concept is predicated on the principles of concern for the quality of relationships, a desire to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy and a concern to see staff management issues as the routine preserve of the line manager to be addressed in the workplace.

The BUT welcomes the opportunity to dialogue with the Ministry on this approach to the management of schools. With this approach there will be need for training of the management teams of the schools.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, the theme, *Quality Education: Providing Safe and Healthy Environments for All*, is very apt at this juncture in our history. For the past year the BUT has been in a struggle with the Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs & Sports on the Health and Safety issues at the Louis Lynch Secondary School.

For the past twenty (20) years teachers have been complaining to the BUT about the environmental problems being experienced at that school. Questions have been raised about the motives of the leadership of the BUT in this problem. I state categorically that the sole interest of the leadership of the BUT is the representation of its members. The BUT will not be side-tracked or derailed in its pursuit to represent all its members.

As was stated this issue surfaced more than twenty years ago when members of the BUT wrote the union outlining the various ailments which they were experiencing. What is puzzling in all of this is the fact that the former Minister of Education, the Honourable Reginald Farley, was a signatory to this letter when he was a teacher at the school. Questions were asked about the seriousness of the illnesses and suggestions were made that perhaps some could have been menopausal, that these illnesses were common across the country and some teachers were unwilling to work.

Therefore it is mind boggling when statements are made that the BUT's agenda is a political one. Let me re-emphasize, if representing the members of the BUT is political then the BUT pleads GUILTY, and the BUT will continue to represent its members and be political. We apologise to no one for this.

From the outset the BUT asked the Ministry of Education for a safe and healthy environment for teachers. This is a duty of the Ministry of Education. In a section of the media, the question was asked, what would satisfy the BUT? The answer is a simple one, A Safe and Healthy environment in which the teachers can function.

In a letter dated February 27, 2006, the present Minister of Education, the Honourable Anthony Wood, indicated that records show that approximately 6 per cent of the occupants of the school have reported ill and that was not a basis for relocation or closure of the school. However on March 2, 2006, the Right

Honourable Prime Minister Owen Arthur, stated that one person being ill is one too many. The BUT applauds the Prime Minister for his recognition that the illness of the teachers must be taken seriously.

On the other hand the BUT questions the motives of the doctors who made a presentation at the Social Partnership Meeting indicating that the illness of the teachers can be termed as Mass Psychogenic Illness. Why did the doctors not approach the BUT or the Ministry of Education to lend assistance to the teachers since April 2005?

Why since the Social Partnership Meeting have the doctors not made the approach? Are they questioning the credibility of their fellow counterparts? The BUT reiterates that the illnesses of the teachers are real.

Since the initial meeting with the Prime Minister, attempts are being made to place the seventeen (17) teachers who have been advised by their doctors not to return to the environment at the school.

The teachers who have been reporting to the Ministry of Education and have been ignored by the Chief Education Officer, have now been given an assignment until placement can be found at other schools.

The BUT is now a member of the Task Force. What is very interesting is that at the second meeting of the Social partnership, the scientific team stated that the soil testing indicated that the levels of Perc increased the closer the testing got to the laundry.

It was also stated that even though the school was cleaned thoroughly, the mold spores kept multiplying rapidly.

Now what are some of the issues to be learnt from the Louis Lynch situation?

- (a) Management of the problem is very vital
- (b) Teachers must be prepared to stand up for what they know is right
- (c) Sickness of persons must be taken seriously by those in authority
- (d) Teachers must understand that they are workers and they have rights
- (e) Response by the persons who can make a difference must be positive
- (f) The health of a nation is the wealth of the nation
- (g) The working conditions of teachers are the learning conditions of students.

The response of the Ministry of Education to send substitute teachers to an environment which is unsafe smacks of insensitivity and disregard for persons' health. Every day, schools in Barbados are without teachers because of illnesses and other reasons.

Some teachers are absent at times for three weeks without a teacher being sent to replace them. Why aren't these schools given the same prompt attention which the Louis Lynch Secondary was given? Precedence has been set. It seems to the BUT that something is very wrong with the system.

The Barbados Union of Teachers again states that its responsibility is to its members. The parents have a responsibility to make sure that the PTA represents their views. The BUT is of the opinion that the environment at the Louis Lynch School is not safe, but it respects the decision of the parents to allow their children to remain in the unsafe environment.

A healthy and safe environment will promote quality education. The time has come for all schools to have safety Committees as is being advocated by the Health and Safety at Work Act. The BUT had long ago sent a questionnaire on health and safety practices in schools but the response from the schools was not encouraging.

We are indebted (Executive and members of CTUSAB, President Sir Roy Trotman, Patrick Frost) to our regional and international partners, the Caribbean Union of Teachers, the Education International (EI), who have stood by us in all this. The National Education Association (NEA) has sent some materials which will be distributed during the second day of the conference. The BUT wants to publicly thank the Fulfillment Services of the NEA and especially Mrs. Marsha Smith for the support which they gave.

However the struggle is far from complete as we press on to have a final resolution to this and other problems which confront the teaching services.

Despite our best efforts they are those who seem bent on thwarting the work of this union. There is a saying that the more things change, the more they remain the same and teachers must unite to withstand this myopic and backward view.

Mr. Master of ceremonies, members of the Head Table, honoured guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I have shared with you tonight the BUT's perspective on our position on Health and Safety in schools, providing a safe and healthy environment for all. I have also looked at other pressing issues regarding violence and indiscipline in schools and other matters with which we as educators must confront.

I have been honoured to represent you and am humbled at the confidence and trust you have reposed in me as your president. With the help of God, your support and that of my Executive I pledge to continue to give quality representation at all times. I continue to crave the prayers of the church and thank the many who have called and offered prayers during the past months. Indeed with God all things are possible.

Together we are strong. Unity is strength.

I Thank You.

Karen Best
April, '06