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## **Summary of Proceedings**

### **Public Hearing**

Held on **Wednesday December 08, 2021** from **10:25 a.m. to 12:29 p.m.**

**Subject matter:** An examination of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the State's capacity to provide support to persons who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic.

**Venue:** Virtual via the Zoom platform

### **Committee Members**

The following Committee Members were present:

- Mr. Paul Richards
- Mrs. Penelope Beckles, MP
- Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
- Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP
- Mr. Rohan Sinanan
- Mr. Avinash Singh
- Mr. David Nakhid

The following Committee Member was excused:

- Mr. Roger Munroe, MP

### **Witnesses who appeared**

The following officials appeared before the Committee:

#### **Ministry of Labour**

- Ms. Natalie Willis                      Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
- Ms. Sengeeta Boondoo                Senior Legal Officer

- Ms. Sabina Gomez Chief Labour Relations Officer
- Mr. Bruce Spencer Head, Labour Market Information Unit

**Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association**

- Mr. George Naime Director
- Mr. Dale Parson Director

**Banking Insurance and General Workers Union**

- Mr. Trevor Johnson General Secretary
- Mr. Jason Brown 2nd Vice President

**Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries**

- Mr. Mark Edghill President
- Ms. Vashti G. Guyadeen Chief Executive Officer

**Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union**

- Mr. Peter Farmer Secretary General

**Amalgamated Workers Union**

- Michael Prentice President General

**Key Issues Discussed**

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries (TTCSI)**:

**Grants**

- i. The inability to access grants provided by the State due to non-compliance to the requirements for the grants;
- ii. The salary relief grants were available to selected sectors, as such, employees of sectors deemed essential, who were laid-off during the grant period of May/June, were not eligible to receive the grant;
- iii. The ambiguity in the last date of employment required when applying for the grant persons whose last salary was on April 29, 2021 and unemployed as at May 01, 2021 were not eligible to receive the grant.
- iv. According the information received from the TTCSI, all grants applied for by their membership in 2020 were received, however, in 2021 only 10% of the grants applied for were received.

### **Initiatives by Organisation**

- v. The TTCSI indicated that they together with the Ministry of Trade and Industry assisted persons who were non-compliant become compliant in order to be eligible to receive the grant.
- vi. The TTCSI has also attempted to lobby with the government and the Ministry of Health to allow the all closed sectors to return to work.
- vii. The cultural and creative industries sector have sought the assistance of the TTCSI to increase their compliance and register their businesses during the pandemic.
- viii. The tourism sector has begun the creation and implementation of a comprehensive 'staycation' campaign to be refined in time for the reopening of the sector.
- ix. TTCSI to assist 80 firms, in the first instance, within the business and professional services sector with the ability to win new markets, through their Gateway to Trade programme with a nine (9) month training programme focusing on marketing, website development, export and market connections.

### **Sectors most affected by COVID-19 pandemic**

- x. Preliminary data from TTCSI indicated that the tourism sector, sport services, personal care services, and day care services are among the sectors most affected by the pandemic, as these sectors are yet to reopen.
- xi. TTCSI also indicated that the business and professional services sector (i.e. consultants, IT professionals, architects) has flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic as the sectors were able to utilise technology and the virtual environment to bid for an increased number of contracts.
- xii. The TTCSI highlighted that its comprehensive report on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sectors amongst its membership will be completed by the end of 2021.

### **Vaccination Policy**

- xiii. The TTCSI indicated that instituting a mandatory vaccination policy will be challenging as the vaccination requirements of each sectors may differ depending on the work environment within that sector.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Banking Insurance and General Workers Union (BIGWU)**:

### **Industrial Relation Matters**

- xiv. Between 100 to 300 unvaccinated workers within the financial sectors received warning letters.
- xv. There were less than 10 industrial relations matters against employers, received by the trade unions that were sent to the industrial court.
- xvi. Each matter is important as it can set a precedence within the sector for how other employers will treat with these matters going forward.

- xvii. Meaningful consultations needed between the employers and the trade union regarding the vaccination policy, change in work hours and the operational policy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Initiatives by Organisation**

- xxiii. BIGWU and the Joint Trade Union Movement (JTUM) completed a paper highlighting the pros and cons of work-from-home.
- xix. BIGWU also conducted a risk assessment with the Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) to present to the financial institutions.
- xx. BIGWU together with JTUM held a meeting with the Chambers of Commerce to discuss their position the COVID-19 pandemic situation and make recommendations to get business sectors reopened.
- xxi. BIGWU interfaced with the employers on behalf of employees to reduce the number of retrenchment.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union (ACAWU)**:

**Grants**

- xxii. As at December 08, 2021, no worker who is a member of the ACAWU and applied for the income support grant has received the payment;

**Initiatives by Organisation**

- xxiii. The ACAWU coordinated with umbrella trade unions to lobby with Ministries distributing the grants to assist the members who have not yet received their grants.
- xxiv. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) advised the ACAWU that the grants were approved but the Ministry is awaiting funds to disburse the grants.

**Sectors most affected by COVID-19 pandemic**

- xxv. Caribbean Airlines Limited (CAL) refused to institute a rotational approach to the employment situation instead persons on active duty received a 5% to 10% salary reduction while persons not on active duty received a 100% salary reduction.
- xxvi. ACAWU indicated that, as at December 15, 2021, all persons laid off will be back out to work.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Labour**:

**Vaccination Policy**

- xxvii. A draft paper on a possible vaccination policy and guidelines are currently before the Cabinet for approval.

- xxviii. The policy framework includes consultations with the employers and workers and other stakeholders to provide information on the effect of policy and the enforcement of the policy on the employees and employers.
- xxix. The responsibility for the creation of a work-from-home policy is with the Ministry of Planning and Development while the MOL will be assisting with the drafting.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association:**

**General Information:**

- xxx. TTMA identified the following issues with the grant distribution for pandemic:
  - a. the need for a social safety net i.e. an NIS unemployment relief programme;
  - b. the need for a review of the National Insurance System in Trinidad and Tobago;
  - c. the need to create a programme that allows the business community and the labour force to interface and collectively provide meaningful contributions to the system.
- xxxi. The manufacturing sector was not affected much by the COVID-19 pandemic and is still expected to double the manufacturing output by 2025.

The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Amalgamated Workers Union:**

**General Information:**

- xxxii. The Amalgamated workers union represents workers from the following organisations:
  - a. Bermudez;
  - b. East Side and New City Mall;
  - c. Royal Castle; and
  - d. Port of Spain City Corporation.

**Sectors most affected by COVID-19 pandemic**

- xxxiii. The fast food sector represented by the trade union was most affected as its employees were not considered essential services the sector was closed.

**Grants**

- xxxiv. The Amalgamated Workers Union indicated that there were persons who applied for grants, were approved but have not yet received the grant payment.

**Initiatives by Organisation**

- xxxv. The trade union waived union dues for the members laid-off due to the pandemic restrictions.
- xxxvi. The union has also endeavoured to settle its industrial relations matters outside of the court and are still some outstanding matters to be settled.

This public hearing can be viewed on demand via our YouTube Channel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIWa4GIM9to>

**Contact the Committee's Secretary**

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*Committees Unit*

*December 14, 2021.*