



International
Labour
Organization

International Labour Office
Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV)

Conference on the New Social Contract - A Trade Union Perspective for the Caribbean

Accra Hotel, Bridgetown, Barbados
25-26 February 2025

Concept Note

Background:

The world is undergoing profound transformations driven by evolving globalization, rapid technological advancements, and the intensifying climate crisis. These shifts are reshaping the world of work, posing significant threats to sustainable economic development and social cohesion. In the Caribbean, as in many other regions, economies grapple with persistent challenges in creating and sustaining decent work for all, undermining the effectiveness of public policies to foster social justice and multidimensional well-being for all, forcing many to leave their home countries and seek opportunities elsewhere. This has challenged the capacity of many governments to provide adequately for its people and to honour its social contract, especially as regulatory systems and structural reforms often fail to keep pace with the rapid changes transforming the world of work.

In today's rapidly changing world, critical gaps persist in relation to decent work. In the Caribbeans, and in many other regions, these gaps extend beyond the scarcity of employment opportunities to include significant barriers to the quality of employment—jobs that are productive and meet all the core requirements of decent work. The problem is particularly acute after decades of liberal economic policies focused on macroeconomic stability, which have been characterized in many instances by deregulation, privatization, financialization, and a reduced role for the state in the economy. In fact, while these policies may stimulate economic growth in some instances, they often do so at the expense of decent working conditions, workers' rights, and fail to promote the creation of quality jobs. As a result, they can deepen inequalities and exacerbate social instability, particularly when not accompanied by a coherent set of public policies that create decent work opportunities for all and promote social justice.

Therefore, **one major barrier to decent work is the absence of pro-employment macroeconomic frameworks that can drive inclusive and decent job rich productivity and economic growth, while upholding fundamental principles and rights at work (FPRW).** Such frameworks are essential to ensuring decent work for all and that all workers receive adequate and fair wages, including living wages, which are critical to guaranteeing that work provides not only economic security but also equality and dignity.

Additionally, **many workers remain excluded from essential protections, facing heightened vulnerability, particularly in times of crisis or unexpected events, which represents another critical barrier to decent work.** These workers often lack social protection and/or completely fall outside the scope of protections afforded by formal work arrangements and contracts. This exclusion severely undermines efforts to achieve inclusive, sustainable, and human-centered economic development, ultimately hindering efforts to build resilient economies and societies.

In this context, the concept of a “new social contract” has emerged as a framework for rethinking the relationships between the state and its people. This new social contract aims to foster social progress and social justice, to ensure systematic inclusivity in every dimension of social and economic life, and to provide our economies and our societies with the necessary agility to adapt to a world undergoing rapid and profound changes. In this sense, any future social contract, should recognize the decisive role of the labour market, in particular of decent work, by ensuring employment priorities are aligned with economic, social and environmental priorities. This ensures that everyone can benefit from economic development through decent work, social protection, and a just share of the wealth they help to create regardless of the type of work or their employment status. It calls for a more inclusive and equitable distribution of the benefits of economic growth, and for a strengthening of social dialogue and collective bargaining as means to achieve this.

The new social contract also recognizes the need for just transitions. As the world faces the acceleration of profound transformational changes, the absence of comprehensive and integrated policy frameworks to properly manage these transitions, ensuring they are just transitions, poses immediate and future barriers to decent work for many. Ensuring that these transitions are just is therefore crucial to providing workers with the necessary support to adapt, thereby preventing increased inequalities and insecurity.

Trade unions have a crucial role to play in shaping this new social contract. As the largest membership-based organisation in the world, they must advocate for more inclusive and equitable economic policies, and for a just transition towards a more sustainable economy. However, to effectively play this role, trade unions need to adapt to the changing world of work and to strengthen their capacity to represent and protect workers in non-standard forms of employment.

This conference aims to provide a platform for trade unions from across Caribbeans to discuss these challenges and opportunities, and to support them in shaping the new social contract in their respective countries and at the regional level. It is an opportunity for trade unions to learn from each other’s experiences, to develop common strategies, and to strengthen their collective voice in shaping the future of work, in particular towards the Second World Summit for Social Development in 2025. It is an ample opportunity to evaluate the involvement of the labour movement in the Agenda 2030, and to discuss the way forward, including their continued participation in the multilateral system to shape public policies for renewing the social contract, through initiatives such as the Global Coalition for Social Justice.

In that regard, the conference will focus on the concept of a new social contract, how existing social contracts have failed in providing for the needs of its people, and delve deeper on two key aspects of the new social contract: macroeconomic policies for inclusive and decent job rich productivity and economic growth, and essential protections for all workers. These are two of the main drivers that public policies could leverage on to build inclusive, sustainable, resilient and equitable economies that create decent work for all, protecting workers' rights and living standards in a context of just transitions. They are also areas where trade unions can have a significant impact and address the specific needs of groups in vulnerable situations, ensuring no one is left behind. By focusing on these areas, the conference aims to equip trade unions with the knowledge and tools they need to shape the new social contract and to promote decent work and social justice in the region.

Objectives:

1. The conference will provide a platform for regional dialogue among trade unions, governments, employers' representatives and academia on the evolving social contract in the context of changing economic, social and environmental impacts, with a particular focus on macroeconomic policies for inclusive and decent job rich productivity and economic growth; and essential protections for all workers.
2. It will facilitate exchange of best practices and lessons learned with regards to the role trade unions play in influencing policy making, and to discuss strategies on recent economic and social challenges.
3. Develop actionable recommendations for policy and practice to strengthen the role of the tripartite constituents, governments, employers' and workers' organisations, in shaping the new social contract.