

# Conversations on a Shared Development Agenda for Saint Lucia While Optimizing the Role of the Labour Movement

[SALUTATIONS]

Tonight, I stand on the shoulders of those in the grassroots of the labour movement; those fallen soldiers and comrades who powered the struggle, though they were never empowered to lead. People like Bros Zalimet, Murray, Comrade Stokes and Scottie, Sisters Willeta, Lone, Ma Tella (Soucis), Bro Francois (Giant), Bro White of Crown Lands, Comrade Leroy (Mewichen), Comrade Mathurin (Dadoo), Comrade La Ras. They paved the way for us to stand here and so we honour them today and every May Day.

To borrow a turn of phrase from journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne, as I see it, my job tonight is to share ideas meant to comfort the afflicted, which means they're quite likely to afflict the comfortable. But that is what it takes to create the real and meaningful change we need to flourish. So I ask you to bear with me because I know we all "love the land that gave us birth".

## What is the Labour Movement?

May Day—also known as International Workers' Day—is usually when the working class and working-class organizations commemorate the struggles of workers and engage in acts of solidarity in defence of their dignity and human rights. It is therefore appropriate for us to spend some time reflecting on the labour movement here in St. Lucia.

I subscribe to an expansive concept of the labour movement. In my opinion, it represents all the social and intellectual capital that has been invested in the working-class struggles, as well as the institutions and organizations, processes, and events emanating from and contributing to the social, economic, cultural, and political advances of the working people. This includes trade unions, political parties and organizations, progressive cultural expressions and folklore traditions. Tonight, permit me to focus on trade unions and political organizations.

Traditionally, I share the perspective that only the membership of trade union organizations must seek to influence their organizational integrity and functional efficiency. However, I am certain that—given my modest contribution to the movement—Comrades would be assured that I speak in solidarity.

Suffice it to say the institutionalization of the trade union movement has come at the expense of its lifeline: the movement itself. By "movement", I mean the grassroots mobilization and the nurturing of the spirit of solidarity. If the workers of this country are to successfully recalibrate the dynamics and ownership of power in this country, the effort must begin with a comprehensive grassroots mobilization initiative.

The Labour movement must also, with laser precision, identify the underlying structural inequalities which perpetuate social injustice in all of its manifestations, including gender-based

violence, social exclusion, and persistent poverty. Our lofty development goals will remain a fleeting illusion unless we address the wider systemic impediments to our progress.

There is also an urgent need for the labour movement to invest in enhancing the knowledge of its key operatives in the fine art of strategy and tactics. In my opinion, far too often valuable time, energy, and resources are spent focusing on matters that are not germane to the well-being and livelihoods of the working class. As renowned Pan-Africanist, Amilcar Cabral reminds us “Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone’s head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children. . .”

One of the political organizations I referenced is WRM—The Worker Revolutionary Movement—which has metamorphosed into several progressive streams and processes. The other is the Saint Lucia Labour Party, the oldest political party in Saint Lucia. Between 1939 and 1950, Comrades of the Organising Committee (or OC) stomped the hills and valleys of Saint Lucia advocating for “**Pouvwa pou mété an ti kwa.**” Those comrades were very much conscious of the challenging social, economic and political circumstances impacting the working class. Yet, they remained resolute in their resolve to robustly confront the dreadful conditions under which most working people, worked and lived at the time. Their struggle was also integral to wider Caribbean social justice movements. They articulated a working-class vision for the emerging Caribbean civilization.

## What is the Labour Movement’s Vision?

Today, many will flaunt the notion that we have essentially fulfilled the OC’s working-class vision. In support of their misconception, they ‘wave the banner’ of better wage structures, improved housing conditions for some, increased access to primary and secondary education, relatively better health care services and the fact that we have since attained political independence. They may also point to the existence of several contemporary social welfare and social protection initiatives and processes as justification for their position.

However, I wonder if we are yet to fully appreciate the profundity of the OC’s working-class vision as it was articulated by the Labour Movement’s founding fathers. Could it be that they envisioned a society wherein the masses of working people had adequate political space, shared power and were economically empowered? Did they imagine a nation in which the national development goals and objectives were cocreated and appropriately informed by the collective wisdom, spirituality and social consciousness of the working class?

If indeed this was their vision, then I posit that—in spite of our obvious achievements as a people—**we remain precariously adrift in the Atlantic Ocean.** As heirs of the Adult Suffrage Revolution (which spanned the period from 1939 to 1950), we are duty-bound to reflect on the OC’s working-class vision, so aptly captured in the theme of **Bread, Freedom, and Justice.** We must therefore cast aside blankets of illusion and accept our responsibilities as genuine heirs of the working-class revolution for social justice, and economic and political empowerment.

This duty only becomes more pressing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, given the extent to which it has exacerbated many of our social, economic and political challenges. The pandemic itself and the discourse surrounding our response to this crisis has compelled various sectoral interests to reflect on prevailing development agendas and modes of governance. There is now an emerging mantra referred to as the “new normal.” Several commentators and representative bodies, including Trade Unions, Private Sector Associations and Civil Society Organisations are currently focussed on how we should prepare for and manage this “new normal.” Amid this constant refrain, the notion of “us” and “we” has assumed renewed significance. As the declarations that “we’re all on the same ship” continue to intensify, I find myself reflecting deeply on the fact that—if we are to truly develop as a nation—our development path must be guided by those most vulnerable to the impacts of such a seismic societal shift: the working class themselves. As Romain Virgo sang in 2009, “Who feels it knows it”.

## How Do We Move Forward?

Given all of this, it is abundantly clear that—notwithstanding our obvious achievements as a small island state thus far—there is an urgent imperative to redefine our development agenda. The time has come for us to embrace a development paradigm that encourages popular participation in our decision-making processes. The new approach to development should create a supportive atmosphere that enables people to obtain the resources, knowledge, organizational ability, agency, navigational skills, and political freedom they need to take action and have a positive impact on their own lives, families, and communities. It is essential that this environment is open to everyone, regardless of social identity, and inspires individuals to work individually, collectively and collaboratively to bring about change and create sustainable futures.

## What is Development?

But, what *is* development? It is a very contested concept, both a polyvalent and multifaceted construct.

For some, it is traditionally defined by the size of the national budget, the GDP, tourist arrivals, and stay-over data or Standard and Poor's ratings. It can be about monuments or even white elephants loaded with mortar and steel, often plagued by cost overruns. Sometimes it masquerades in the costumes of ‘feel good’, vote-seeking, or electioneering revelry.

For many others, it is about their ability to make ends meet, and so it revolves around these questions: Can I help clothe and feed my family? Do I have access to a reliable supply of clean drinking water? Do I have access to affordable health care? Do my children have access to quality and affordable education services? Can my family and myself afford proper housing or shelter? Can I afford to purchase a piece of land? Am I able to access government services, without having to compromise my dignity? Am I earning a liveable wage? Do I have access to affordable reliable internet services?

Then there is the holistic approach that is grounded in the principles of social justice and which seeks to temper our intoxication with those more traditional notions of development. Most holistic approaches speak to placing people at the “centre” of development processes. Notably, this mantra has found residence in political communications and electioneering discourse.

I subscribe to the holistic perspective of development in its undiluted form. In my opinion, the overarching goal of holistic development is empowerment. *People’s* empowerment! The concept of empowerment I speak of emerged within the bowels of social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s and became the organizing principle of labour movements. That perspective of empowerment was informed by the concepts of **equity, solidarity, and critical consciousness**.

Several will argue that we are in the post-welfare State era, that social and political discourse has evolved, and that I must get with the programme. Indeed, I lament the almost complete surrender to fatalism and neo-liberal orthodoxy. As the writer bemoans in the Book of Lamentation:

*How deserted lies the city,  
once so full of people!  
How like a widow is she,  
who once was great among the nations!  
She who was queen among the provinces  
has now become a slave.  
Bitterly she weeps at night,  
tears are on her cheeks.  
Among all her lovers  
there is no one to comfort her.  
All her friends have betrayed her;  
they have become her enemies.  
(Lamentation 1:1-2)*

I am mindful that with this surrender have emerged idiotic distortions and even misrepresentations of the concept of empowerment. If, as some argue, surrendering to the neo-liberal orthodoxy was the correct strategy, why then, after forty years, do the masses continue to sing along to Jah-T/Ashanti’s Sufferers song with such passion and gusto?

## How Do We Develop Our Nation Holistically?

There can be no doubt that what we need is a multifaceted, interconnected, rights-based development agenda grounded in the core values of social justice, human dignity, transparency, and accountability.

Permit me to expound a little further on these core values:

## Core Values

### Social Justice

The concept of social justice emphasizes the need for social and economic measures to recognise and take into account the needs and development priorities of the vulnerable and oppressed. The social justice approach must appropriately represent the diversity of social identities in public policies and development interventions.

### Human Dignity and Worth of the Person

Those acting on behalf of the State are obligated to respect the fundamental dignity and worth of the people they serve and treat everyone with care and respect. This emphasizes the need for development practitioners to be culturally literate and respectful of ethical standards of practice.

### Transparency and Accountability

Beyond the obligation to adhere to principles of good governance, regulations must be enacted and enforced to compel the State and State actors to be held accountable to the citizenry for their stewardship.

### Rights-Based

The rights-based approach to development is based upon the spirit and letter of Saint Lucia's Constitution and provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Per Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi, rights-based approaches to development require duty-bearers (State and non-State actors) to assist rights-holders to become aware of and exercise their rights in development processes (2004). These rights are universal and inalienable; indivisible; interdependent and interrelated. Per Blanchet-Cohen and Bedeaux as well as UNICEF, they are non-discriminatory and should foster equality, inclusivity; and the rule of law (2014; 2004). This rights-based approach is also emphasized in the letter and spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [A/RES/61/106]; Convention on the Rights of the Child [Resolution 44/25] 20 November 1989; Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/RES/61/295); Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Violence against Women (1979); Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989)<sup>1</sup>; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>23</sup>.

Now let's explore five pillars of the proposed multifaceted, interconnected, rights-based development agenda that can empower us to develop our nation in a holistic, people-centred way:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cedaw.pdf>

## Development Pillars

### Grassroots Economic Participation and Empowerment

We begin with grassroots economic participation and empowerment. Recommended policy measures include:

- As a matter of priority, the creation of sustainable opportunities for decent work and economic participation, especially among traditionally marginalized communities and youth.
- Implementation of a comprehensive affordable land and home ownership initiative, with a special focus on meeting the needs of the youth population. In this regard, I support calls for Invest Saint Lucia and other State bodies to utilize the vast portfolio of state-owned lands in Vieux Fort and other southern communities for grassroots economic activity and empowerment. This includes affordable property ownership for the landless and, in particular, the youth population.
- Development of a national youth employment policy and implementation strategy.
- Improvement of the policy environment and institutional frameworks for community-based Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).
- An affirmative action amendment that reserves 30-40% of public sector procurement contracts for allocation to small and medium enterprises, especially youth-owned ones.
- Development of a community economic empowerment strategy to optimize opportunities for community-based entrepreneurship. This should involve conducting assessments in rural and marginalized communities to identify the existing economic determinants for community economic participation.
- Facilitation of inclusive and active citizen participation in the development of macroeconomic policies.
- Facilitation of grassroots, community-based dialogue on accentuating the opportunities provided by new and emerging industries, including fashion, culture, arts, entertainment, agriculture, technology, and sports.
- Accelerated modernization of apprenticeship schemes, internships, workforce development initiatives and school-to-work transition programmes. This would include modern and future-focused career guidance and planning, targeted career and employability skills development, education-related work experiences and opportunities for career growth.

### Optimized Investments Harnessing Local Social and Intellectual Capital across All Development Sectors

To optimize investments that harness local social and intellectual capital across all development sectors, I recommend:

- Accelerated digitization of learning environments.
- Accentuated opportunities for young people to create and utilize technological and innovative solutions to address our development challenges.

- Accelerated education sector reform to create a more fit-for-purpose sector through initiatives that treat curriculum relevance and connectedness, learning integration, and critical life skills as development priorities.
- Accelerated modernization of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).
- Increased investments in the development and promotion of creative arts and sports as sustainable development imperatives. This must include the provision of social security support and social protection measures to support artists and sports persons who find themselves incapable of meeting their basic needs.
- I also echo the calls for the development of a modernized national youth service programme, not as an extension of the deficit discourse paradigm to punish young people, but rather as a tool to build resilience and harness the social and intellectual capital of our diverse youth population.

## Participatory Governance

Moving on to participatory governance. Here I refer to both grassroots organizing as well as the creation of safe spaces and environments for citizens' engagement in development and governance processes. I note that we have moved from a “Contract of Faith” in 1997 to “Putting People First” in 2021. Please don't misunderstand me. I am not questioning the sincerity which underpins this mantra but my academic background and trade union training oblige me to interrogate these concepts. As V.I Lenin cautioned "**People always have been the foolish victims of deception and self-deception in politics, and they always will be, until they have learned to seek out the interests of some class or other behind all moral, religious, political and social phrases, declarations and promises.**"

I simply note that the former declaration implied a concept of citizens' engagement and of shared governance while the latter conjures images of well-meaning but overwhelmed elected representatives trying their human best to juggle their interpretation of our needs and priorities.

I therefore propose:

- The Creation of opportunities and safe spaces for the citizenry to directly engage with policymakers—including Members of Parliament, Ministers of Government, Local Government Councillors, and para-statal bodies—to discuss issues confronting communities.
- Enhancement of public awareness and social media campaigns to ensure messages are inclusive, relevant, and reach diverse audiences.
- Respect for citizens' rights to freely express their opinions, worldview, and perspectives on development processes and to engage in advocacy to promote their rights, responsibilities, and interests.
- Leadership training for Parliamentarians and Local Government Councillors to improve their capacity to respond promptly to the needs of the citizenry, especially that of under-represented groups and communities.

- Support for the institutional strengthening and capacity building of community-based and civil society organizations, especially those focused on persons living with disabilities, and those serving marginalized and vulnerable communities.
- Accelerated transformation of governance processes and culture by optimizing the use of technology to facilitate inclusive decision-making and efficient delivery of public services.

## Safe Spaces, Peaceful Communities, and Nurturing Environments

Next, we have safe spaces, peaceful communities, and nurturing environments. A culture of violence has pervaded our society. Unfortunately, we are often too preoccupied with pointing fingers at young people, persons from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and citizens living in deprived and socially, excluded communities. We must abandon this classist approach to violence prevention and prioritize developing and implementing holistic measures and strategies to create a culture of peace, safe spaces, peaceful communities, and nurturing environments. Several research studies have highlighted the prevalence of adopting ad-hoc, disintegrated, quick-fix remedies to this complex phenomenon. The evidence does not support the efficacy of an over-reliance on the traditional criminal justice approach to crime and violence reduction. Perhaps the time has arrived for us to transition to social-ecological or public health models of violence prevention. The public health model in particular provides a useful framework to investigate and analyze the contributing factors and consequences of violence and to craft effective violence prevention programmes and efficacious policy interventions.

The public health approach consists of four (4) steps<sup>4</sup>:

1. Define the problem through the systematic collection of information about the magnitude, scope, characteristics, and consequences of violence.
2. Establish why violence occurs using research to determine the causes and correlation of violence, the factors that increase or decrease the risk for violence, and the factors that could be modified through interventions.
3. Find out what works to prevent violence by designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions.
4. Implement effective and promising interventions in a wide range of settings. The effects of these interventions on risk factors and the target outcome are monitored, and their impact and cost-effectiveness are evaluated.

The public health model seeks to provide the maximum benefit for the broadest cross-section of people. In the short-to-medium term, the following violence prevention measures are proposed to facilitate the creation of safer spaces, peaceful communities, and more nurturing environments:

- Accelerated development of more evidence-based citizen security initiatives.



- Accelerated development and implementation of an evidence-based integrated violence prevention policy and action plan.
- Incorporation of peacebuilding outcomes across development sectors, such as poverty alleviation, sports, arts, entertainment, education, local government, tourism, infrastructure, etc.
- An accentuated transition toward restorative justice initiatives.
- Support for community-based peacebuilding initiatives.
- Capacity enhancement for government agencies and civil society organizations to promote and practice the public health model and social-ecological approaches to violence prevention.
- Training in positive youth development work and strength-based approaches to professionals within the criminal justice system, including the police and those engaged and working with young people at risk of, or currently engaged with, gangs and other challenged communities.
- Support for community-based training in conflict resolution techniques and non-violent communication.
- Initiation of a comprehensive grassroots-led “Peace Campaign” across all communities and sectors.
- Promotion of peace education within formal and informal learning environments, communities, and virtual spaces.
- Establishment of benchmarks and indicators for assessing social inclusion in governance and civic processes.
- Accelerated action on gender-based violence.
- Development and implementation of a positive parenting support programme.
- Transformation of the Boys Training Centre (Formerly the Massade Industrial School): This institution is a product of an era defined by Charles Dickens in his iconic novel, *Oliver Twist*. When I went to work there in 1983, 80% of all the young men who completed their stint at the institution ended up in prison within two years of leaving the centre. My exit was hastened by an entrenched culture of resistance to change. I don’t get the impression that things are better but the time is long overdue for a complete overhaul of the Juvenile Justice system, including access to community-based non-custodial “ Scaffold” for those young men and women who are trying to cope with adversities. Wherever institutionalization becomes necessary, let be within an institution that is properly resourced and governed by the fundamental principles of the convention on the rights of the child and other appropriate legislative, policy, and ethical considerations. I often wonder what this place would be like if the children of social, economic, and political elites used these services.

## Youth Empowerment

Last, but most certainly not least, we have, youth empowerment. Throughout Saint Lucia’s history, young people have made, and continue to make, significant contributions to its development. Yet it remains evident that perceptions of young people are informed primarily by deficit discourse perspectives. This deficit discourse perspective model conceptualizes youth as

either broken or in danger of becoming broken (Benson et al. 2006), both dangerous and endangered (Anthony 1969), or as problems to be managed (Roth et al. 1998).

This deficit discourse paradigm permeated the Caribbean youth development landscape decades ago and can be traced to the post-emancipation period. Indeed, *Voice* newspaper editions of the late 1800s and early 1900s are populated with deficit commentary about youth, especially from more privileged members of society, prompting unsung heroes like James E Belgrave into action.

Conversely, the positive youth development perspective is a rights-based concept and speaks to the engagement of young people as critical agents for social change, economic growth and technological innovation. To bring some much-needed clarity to this concept of positive youth development, William Damon (2004) posits that positive youth development “emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people, including young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the most troubled histories” (15). While the positive youth development approach recognizes the existence of adversities and developmental challenges that may affect children in various ways, it resists conceiving of the developmental process mainly as an effort to overcome deficits and risks. Instead, it begins with a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute importantly to the world. The positive youth development approach aims at “understanding, educating, and engaging children in productive activities rather than at correcting, curing, or treating them for maladaptive tendencies or so-called disabilities” (Damon 2004, 15).

There is ample evidence that successive Labour governments have made progressive interventions in youth development. However, I am appealing to the government to accelerate the transition to a positive youth development paradigm. We need to intensify investments in positive youth development interventions. I often remark that the only thread which prevents the total collapse of the youth development architecture is the sheer dedication and commitment of our volunteers and professional youth development practitioners in the public sector and civil society.

As we speak, the government has in its possession the blueprint to work collaboratively with young people and other key youth development stakeholders to craft a positive youth development agenda. History will record this era as a defining moment if we muster the political will to provide the tools and invest the resources necessary to accomplish this development imperative. In this regard, I must emphasize the importance of strengthening existing partnerships with the Saint Lucia National Youth Council and other bona fide youth-led networks. The Labour movement has an obligation to provide strategic support to NYC. It was the right thing to do in 1985 and remains the right thing to do today! Our battle cry, I would hope remains- SOLIDARITY FOREVER!

## Are We Ready to Make a Change?

Comrades, May Day is a time when the working class and working-class organizations sponsor celebrations in recognition of the strides we have made in the post-1937 period. By all means, we should celebrate those victories but, given how far we still have to go, I must stand in solidarity with my now-deceased Comrade Leroy Calliste, more popularly known by his sobriquet: The Black Stalin. In his now-famous 1985 Kaiso "Wait Dorothy, Wait" he lamented: *"So much meeting they keeping and Caribbean people still suffering"*, and then boldly proclaimed: *"When Mr. Divider start to divide the bread equally, I going to finish write the whole kaiso about Dorothy, but until then – wait, Dorothy, wait."*

On this esteemed occasion, as we honour the progress we have made, let us keep sight of the strides we have yet to make as we strive to build a society that is equitable, inclusive, and just.

In the words of the German Theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer " We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

Long Live the Labour Movement!

A Luta Continua!