



FEATURE ADDRESS

BY

THE HONOURABLE MAXIE CUFFIE

**MINISTER OF
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & COMMUNICATIONS**

AT THE LAUNCH OF

“Labour in Trinidad and Tobago”

National Library Amphitheatre

June 22nd, 2016

Salutations:

My Cabinet colleague, the Honourable Jennifer Baptiste-Primus, Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise

Development

Members of the Board of Directors of NALIS

The Executive Director of NALIS, Ms. Elizabeth Mahadeo

Representatives of the Ansa McA1 Group of Companies

Other specially invited guests

Members of the media

Ladies and gentlemen

I wish to join with my colleagues at the head table in expressing my sincerest appreciation to NALIS for hosting this exhibition which celebrates the contribution of the labour movement to the growth and development of Trinidad and Tobago.

The prestige of today's event has been greatly enhanced by the presence of the Order of Trinidad and Tobago which was posthumously awarded to Adrian Cola Rienzi, one of the movement's most charismatic labour leaders.

Notwithstanding the illustrious accomplishments of many of his predecessors and those who succeeded him, none can honestly boast of having held the reins of power in what are arguably two of the country's most powerful trade unions;

*the Oilfield Workers Trade Union and the All Trinidad Sugar
and General Workers Union*

Ladies and gentlemen, it will do us no good to belabour the point with respect to the unfortunate events that culminated with the medal being purchased by the ANSA McAl Group and donated to the National Library for safe keeping.

Through their singular act of generosity, the ANSA McAl Group not only rescued a national treasure, but restored national pride as well, and we, as a country, owe them a debt of gratitude.

Today, as visitors view this exhibition, they will see, among other things, a physical medal on display.

What they will not see is the herculean contributions of many like Cola Rienzi, Tubal Uriah “Buzz” Butler, Bhadase Sagan Maharaj, and Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani whose efforts changed forever, the face and fortunes of workers and their families in Trinidad and Tobago.

What they will not see is the “blood, sweat and tears”, if I may use his phrase, of Basdeo Panday, George Weekes, Errol McLeod, Kenrick Rennie and Raffique Shah, as they challenged the authorities of the day, to provide better working conditions and improved terms and conditions of employment for the working class.

Hopefully, those who pass through this exhibition will pause long enough to read, understand and appreciate the contribution of female leaders like Elma Francois who was the first woman in the history of Trinidad and Tobago to be charged with sedition, and who, after she was freed, continued lecturing to working class people until her death in 1944.

Perhaps they will read too, of the contribution of another famous daughter of the soil, Audrey Jeffers, who rose to become the first woman in the country's male-dominated Legislative Council.

Even today, as we read the strident arguments advanced by those labour leaders who participated in Labour Day celebrations on the weekend, we are mindful of and grateful for the contribution so many of them have made to developing the national patrimony through their unions.

All of this begs the obvious question.

What do these labour leaders past and present and the ANSA McAl Group, by its act of generosity, have in common?

The answer, ladies and gentlemen, is quite simple. Both these titans of business and these stalwarts of labour have the interest of the country at the heart of their actions.

While they might come to the table from two seemingly opposing ends, the common interest is really the fate of the red, white and black.

It is for this reason that this Government has included, as a matter of priority, representatives of the labour movement on as many Boards of State Enterprises as is possible.

It is for this reason too, that the National Tripartite Council has been engaged, and for the very same reason the Economic Advisory Board has included amongst its membership, persons whose contribution to the labour movement is without question.

Ladies and gentlemen, long before the most recent labour Day celebrations when strident calls were made for significant amendments to the current compendium of labour laws, this administration had signalled our intention to approach the Parliament and seek the

concurrence of our colleagues on the Opposition Bench to effect changes.

Indeed, a review of this administration's legislative agenda, which has been made official policy, articulates our intention to amend in the medium term, the Industrial Relations Act and the Workmen's Compensation Act.

Additionally, this Government is not unmindful of the effects of the prolonged economic downturn on the working class of Trinidad and Tobago, particularly as it has resulted in the retrenchment of hundreds of workers, and unfortunately, in some other cases, the closure of some businesses.

Today I want to join the chorus of those who call for greater dialogue between the captains of industry and the

comrades in the labour movement, that every avenue of cost containment and equitable sharing of the burden be explored, before a decision is taken to either retrench or terminate employees, or even to close up shop.

This does not, however, relieve this administration of its duty to review the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act with some degree of urgency, to examine whether there are any greater protections that can be afforded the working class.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you peruse this exhibition today, I encourage you to reflect a bit on the contributions made by these men and women whose hearts bled for a better and brighter Trinidad and Tobago. Think too about those whose fists were once clenched in defiance but now remain open to the possibility of even greater dialogue between labour and capital. Pause for a while and remember those

whose lives of sacrifice have us standing where we are today.

May God bless you all, and may God bless our nation.