

**Statement by  
The Most Honourable Andrew Holness, ON, MP,  
Prime Minister of Jamaica  
High-Level Segment of the 108<sup>th</sup> Session (Centenary) of the International Labor  
Conference  
12<sup>th</sup> June 2019**

Mr President,

Jamaica is honoured to speak at this high-level plenary of the 108<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Labour Conference, to commemorate the Centenary of this most important global institution.

Jamaica's democracy was born out of the struggle of the labour movement. Labour is a respected and deeply integrated partner in the tripartite collaborative culture that is a feature of our sociopolitical system. Indeed, Labour has been a critical partner in overcoming political and economic crises in Jamaica throughout the last century and certainly since our Independence in 1962.

A decade ago, Jamaica teetered on the brink of economic collapse. The global financial meltdown at the time exposed the weak foundations of the Jamaican economy. The truth is for decades we had defied economic logic in the management of our fiscal affairs and now we had to reckon with it.

- Our national debt reached an unsustainable high of almost 150% of GDP,
- our net international reserve fell to dangerously low levels, and
- by 2013 overall unemployment stood at almost 16% and youth unemployment was almost 36%.

In the face of this national crisis, Jamaica engaged a tough IMF programme requiring at the time a rescheduling of local debt and a commitment to a primary surplus of 7.5% and deep structural and institutional reforms to our public sector pension system and the national wage bill. Success in overcoming this crisis meant that all stakeholders, the government, private sector, and the unions had to sacrifice. There had to be a consensus on sacrifice.

- Government and the Opposition had to agree to faithfully implement a programme of fiscal discipline regardless of political risks,
- the private sector had to agree to voluntarily accept a reduction of interest and a rescheduling of debt,
- and unions had to agree to wage freeze and a general reform of the public sector which included the introduction of a contributory pension scheme.

Building on our history and culture of a collaborative tripartite system, a strong social consensus mechanism was developed. This was supported by formal institutions, such as:

- the Economic Programme Oversight Committee, which monitored governments implementation of the agreed reforms and reported to the public, and the
- National Partnership Council consisting of representatives of academia, civil society, private sector, labour, the Opposition Party and the Government, which subscribed to a much broader reform agenda to include, rule of law, energy diversification and economic growth.

Today, I can proudly report that Jamaica is in a good place. We have reduced our debt to around 96% of GDP, we have brought down unemployment to 8% and youth unemployment to 22%.

As Jamaica reflects on its economic recovery, and the ILO reflects on its 100 years of progress for the working masses, we must also contemplate the pathway for development for the future. The future of the worker and work. Regardless, of the economic and social crises we will undoubtedly face and the changes in technology that will redefine the workplace, there is an overarching covenant that links the past to our future. It is to be found in the notion of a social contract for inclusiveness and equity, which is as relevant today as it was in 1919. It places a moral and philosophical obligation on democratic institutions and good governance to ensure that all citizens share in the progress and prosperity of their countries.

Undoubtedly, the increasing success of the Jamaican economy owes much to the tripartite arrangements and pivotal role the labour movement played moving the nation towards consensus on shared sacrifice. As the Jamaican economy emerges, the government recognizes the social contract which binds our stakeholders in consensus, where there is shared sacrifice there must be shared prosperity. People must be at the center of development.

The best way to place people at the center of development and share prosperity, is to give them the opportunity to work, to be engaged in that sacred process of transforming their labour and creativity into wealth, earning a living from their effort. Eating their own bread, not by crime, not by immoral means, not by dependency, not by pity; but by work! That is why we are not only seeking to grow our economy, we have actively pursued an economic policy of job creation. I am proud to say that more Jamaicans are employed today than at any other time in our independent history.

The government is not only seeking to expand employment, we are paying keen attention to the quality of jobs and the conditions of work. We are committed to the Decent Work agenda through empowering our citizens with education and training to make them marketable, employable and productive in a competitive labour market and economy

In fulfilment of our Decent Work Agenda, the government has increased its effort and resources in making our citizens 'workforce-ready' through various special training modalities and apprenticeship initiatives such as:

- the Career Advancement Programme,
- The Hope Programme and
- the Jamaica National Service Corps; tens of thousands of young Jamaicans are made work ready, and tens of thousands more continue to be trained through the traditional modalities of our National Training Agency.

We have tabled the Occupational Safety and Health Bill which is now making its way through a joint select committee of Parliament. When the bill is passed it will establish a robust legal framework to protect and enhance the health and safety of the Jamaican Worker in the workplace.

To protect one of our most vulnerable group of workers the, government ratified the Convention concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (c189) which seeks to set employment standards and secure rights for domestic workers.

We are also working to address issues of gender discrimination and social protection for all workers including domestic workers. The Sexual Harassment Bill, to primarily protect our women from violence, harassment and discriminatory practices in the workplace.

Decent work must ultimately mean that the worker can create wealth and own assets from his or

her effort. To this end we have removed employee income tax from more than 60% of all workers in Jamaica. We have also sought to empower our workers by making special provisions for them to purchase shares in profitable public sector enterprises which are being divested. We have significantly lowered mortgage interest rates, and minimum wage earners can access mortgages at 0% through our National Housing Trust. In addition, we have introduced option of an intergenerational mortgage to assist older workers in poor households to acquire housing solutions.

Mr. President, never before, has mankind faced such an enormous challenge that is as discernible as the likely outcomes related to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The scale, scope and complexity of the world of work in the next decade will be unrecognizable. The fusion of technologies will obliterate the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres.

The humanness in the world of work is diminishing, as automation subsumes labour input. Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming almost every aspect of our working lives, enabling enterprises to make faster and better decisions in the boardrooms, increasing operational efficiency, and innovating new products and services.

It is the downside to these transformational changes that will preoccupy our minds in the Caribbean and globally. From the perspective of labour, this is a grim reminder of the importance of the one hundred year-old covenant which is embodied in the preamble of the ILO's Constitution, which states that "wherever the conditions of labour bring about injustice, hardships and deprivation among large numbers of people, the existence of world peace becomes imperiled".

The preamble also called upon every nation to adopt humane conditions of labour, because a failure to do so constitutes "an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries."

Hence the daunting task that lies ahead for us in Jamaica is to embrace the sweeping technological changes, while at the same time protecting and preserving the dignity of our labour. One of the most rapidly expanding job creating sectors of the Jamaican economy is Business Process Outsourcing. However, this sector is most exposed to the cutting edge of technological change and the replacement of jobs. Jamaica will not be daunted by this. We

understand that we must upskill our labour force, and make the investment in creating the our digital and knowledge society to compete effectively for the jobs of the future.

We recognize that there is much more to be done for the Jamaican worker, however much progress is being made within a cooperative and collaborative framework of social consensus building and respect for the human element as the center of the social contract for development. With this understanding intact Jamaica will boldly face the challenges of the future, confident of success.

Mr. President,

The leaders of the Caribbean remain conscious that the future - and our obligations to the next generation - now summons us to 'seize the moment' and draw on the creative imagination that is forever located in the dynamism of a Caribbean tradition that puts people first.

In this regard, we are guided by these words from the Philadelphia Declaration - "the war against want requires to be carried on with unrelenting vigour within each nation, and by continuous and concerted international effort in which the representatives of workers and employers, enjoying equal status with those of governments, join with them in free discussion and democratic decision with a view to the promotion of the common welfare."

Together, Mr. [President, we must ensure that the future work is managed in a strategic, sustainable, transformative manner that leaves no one behind as we seek to move our people from poverty to prosperity.](#)

Thank you.