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JOINT UNIONS COLLECTIVE BARGAINING NEGOTIATIONS WITH GOB KNOW THE FACTS.....

The Belize National Teachers' Union (BNTU), Public Service Union (PSU) and Association of Public Service Senior Managers (APSSM – Heads and Deputies/Vice of GOB Departments) are all legally registered and recognized trade unions/ workers association representing and negotiating on behalf of the 16, 000 plus GOB/Public sector workers of Belize.

Since 12th September, 2008 the three unions representing these Government-paid workers began formal negotiations with the Government of Belize (GOB) on a new 23-points (proposals) package for a new Collective Bargaining (CB) Agreement with Government (GOB). These represent the 5,000 established (permanent) Public Officers; 5,000 plus Government and Grant-aided teachers at all levels; Police, BDF, nurses and an estimated 4,000 Open-vote/unestablished workers. Each proposal had its Justification (Reasons) and relevant background information. The last 3-year CBA agreement between the 3 unions and GOB was signed on 26th February, 2003.

At the first meeting held at the Sir Edney Cain GOB Administration Building in Belmopan, the “Rules of Engagement” were set as to how the negotiations would proceed. These included the following:

- a) The GOB (Official side) would have and name their six (6) persons; mostly Chief Executive Officers (CEO's), the Financial Secretary (FS) and a Senior Administrator Officer-Grade 1; along with a Recording Secretary to take the minutes. Mr. Charles Gibson, then CEO was named Head of the Government-side for the period up to the time of the general elections, when he was then appointed as a Minister in the new UDP Administration. Ms. Marian McNab, CEO in the Ministry of Public Service and Elections and Boundaries then assumed those responsibilities.
- b) The Joint Unions were asked to name their six (6) members (2 per union) to be the negotiators for the Joint Unions (also called the “Staff-Side.”) Ministers of Government would not be involved in direct negotiations this time, as in the past; unless absolutely necessary and so requested (in writing).
- c) At that first meeting (12th September, 2008) it was discussed and agreed, that the 3-Joint Unions would be given a period of three (3) months to prepare one (1) Joint set of Proposals, listing all the items/proposals with the “estimated costs of each and submit these to the Chairman of the Joint Unions/GOB Negotiating Team for forwarding to their principals-Ministers and Cabinet. This was done and the Joint-Unions prepared and submitted their Joint Proposals (23 items) to the Chairman (Mr. Charles Gibson) on 2nd December, 2008.

Minister John Saldivar, then Minister of the Public Service who chaired the meeting of 12th September, 2008 assured the Unions that to ensure good harmonious Industrial relationship, the unions would be given full access and co-operation to all relevant GOB officials and ministries to obtain official data to facilitate our work.

This was not always forth-coming or achievable in certain areas, as per example the true numbers of “Open-Vote” workers and related data, which to date, is still not available to the unions. Again, we found discrepancies in some of the major Economic Indicators as published in the Central Bank Reports and those from the Statistical Institute of Belize (SIB); examples the rates of Inflation, unemployment, taxation/revenues collected etc. This of course affected our work in a few areas. We had to rely to a great part on the official figures of the Annual Estimates of Revenues and Expenditures and the SIB.

- d) The GOB (Official-side) as agreed, were to study and respond to our 23-proposals within three (3) months, which they did not do. On February 27, 2009 Official-side wrote the Joint Unions, saying they needed more time and again, that a few of the unions' proposals needed “Costing.”

This has been the longest, most frustrating Negotiations with GOB ever; over 4-years and 4-months to date; with an uncalled-for break of almost 13 months. This break for one reason or

other, including from weather threats (storms); general elections, dissolution of National Assembly, political campaigning etc. lasted from June 28, 2011 to July 6, 2012.

The last series of Joint Union Negotiations with GOB started in January, 2001 and ended with a 9-page Collective Bargaining Agreement signed by then Prime Minister, Hon. Said Musa and the Presidents of the three Unions at the time – Mr. John Pinelo Sr. (BNTU, Ms. Margaret Ventura (PSU) and Mr. Lawrence Nicholas (APSSM), among others. This included annual Salary Adjustments (Increases) of 5% (Seniors: PS's 9 and above) and 8% (Juniors: PS's 1-8) among other benefits, for Fiscal Year 2003 – 2004; 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 [to cover the (Increase in Cost-of-living) and loss in the value/Purchasing power of our dollar (Bz)] of over 19.6% for the previous ten years (1991-2000).

The unions' present proposals of 23-items which reflect an increase in Inflation Loss in the value/purchasing power of our dollar of about 32% cover the period (2001-2011). Our Belize dollar of ten years ago can only purchase (has a true value) of about sixty-eight cents (68 cents) today of what it was worth then.

Our unions want an Agreement (CBA) to cover the next three or so years in “Salary Adjustments” (Raise in pay, along with other benefits as proposed, in the Package. The Joint Unions proposals with their Justifications (supporting reasons) and Costings, would be implemented over the next three years, as in the past. These proposals include: Salary Adjustments covering the 32% loss in the purchasing power (value) of our dollar and salaries; increases in allowances and grants paid to some GOB-paid employees; a general review of our TAX structures (including Income Tax, Business Tax, GST (Sales Tax) and others; legislation and measures to improve the efficiency and productivity of our public service, better labour laws and working conditions, low interest loans for housing to be financed from available funds from Social Security and DFC, subsidized payments/contributions by GOB for Medical/Health Insurance, especially for major or critical health-care for GOB-paid workers; better more efficient Grievance Handling procedures to deal with workers problems and cases; a proper Meritocracy system and for better Appraisal, performance and promotion policies, among other things. As in the past, the unions have been pointing out many areas of WASTE and ABUSES in the public service where “millions of dollars” are being spent and wasted e.g. transportation: purchases and use of GOB vehicles; hiring of many unnecessary and high-paid “Contract officers;” unnecessary rentals of private buildings at high prices for GOB offices, lack of transparency and accountability in GOB spending as per the Auditor General's Annual Reports, and the list goes on. The Unions have also shared ideas where GOB is losing and/or can collect millions more each years in REVENUES, including in GST (sales tax); Oil policies and revenues, Concessions, poor policies and enforcements, etc.

GOB is just “Strong-headed and Disrespectful” of us the teachers and other GOB-paid workers. They have not studied and engaged properly and seriously with our Unions and the waste, mismanagement and abuses in Government continue.

While our Poverty level, Unemployment and Crime increases and many of our GOB Departments and services cry-out for more resources, attention and better management, our Ministers and political leaders and their cronies continues with their arrogance and high life-styles of living. They boast of things getting better and of GDP growth in the Economy of up to 7% last year-2012 and for projections of same for the future. GOB boasts of having successfully re-negotiated a much better deal and savings of up to US \$ 247 Million for the payment of our Super-bond, which we all welcome; but we must be considered to share and benefit from these justly, along with spending on social programs and infrastructure over the next few years. The politics and boastings continue, while we are being told to be patient and to wait. We say NO! NO! NO! Listen to us, Consider and RESPECT us; teachers, public officers, nurses, police, BDF and Open-vote workers who struggle to provide the GOODS and SERVICES for GOB and the wider community. We demand proper dialogue, inclusion and sharing of our JUST share of the pie. Don't tell us “Not supported” or “No money deh,” when you do not want to listen or engage with us Seriously. You want to continue in your arrogant and wasteful ways. We have been patient long enough and will take it NO MORE.

Government leaders are deliberately LYING and MISREPRESENTING the facts about the Negotiations, the unions' position and the cost of the Salary Adjustments (increases) over the next three years, by more than doubling the actual (costs). Stop LYING and be careful at your attempts at Union Busting and division.....the Truth and Facts are there to be seen.

Let us Stand TOGETHER for Truth and Justice is on our side. Solidarity Forever!

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