

National Workers Union

Workers of the world unite!



DRAFT PROPOSAL FOR A WORKERS' SELF DEFENCE PROGRAMME

- The **National Workers' Union** has been calling for the revitalisation of the COSSABO for the last two years. We see the COSSABO as a deeply democratic institution which facilitates participation in the debates and decision-making processes of the labour movement by the shop floor representatives of the membership and through them the mass membership itself.
- The COSSABO strengthens the movement of working class democracy and undermines the authoritarian top-down approach that we criticise in political parties but of which the trade union movement is just as guilty.
- A COSSABO is not a seminar or symposium, but a working body which addresses fundamental issues by drawing on the input of as wide a range of the membership as possible through the deepening of the process of democratisation - a bottom-up approach.
- Politics deals with the interplay of class and sectional interests and is not restricted to elections.
- The working class has distinct, definite interests and the trade union movement advances, protects and defends those interests through class solidarity, mass organisation, collective action, organisational democracy and political education.
- The long term interest of the working class involves the dismantling of capitalism which today is in deep, abiding crisis. One consequence of that crisis is the attempt by the employers and the state to shift income from the workers to the capitalist employers.
- To achieve this they have launched a massive assault on the rights, entitlements and benefits of the working class. The philosophy underlying that assault is called neo-liberalism.
- The immediate short term interest of the working class involves the development of a programme of self defence which defines immediate priorities which will create space in the struggle against the employers and the neo-colonial state and their neo-liberal programme.
- The struggle to implement the self defence programme utilises class solidarity, mass organisation, collective action, organisational democracy and political education and does not curry favour with governments and political parties which support capitalism and believe there is no alternative to neo-liberalism.
- When we develop consensus on the programme, we can use it as a basis to develop alliances with other classes, groups and/or organisations and especially the small farmers.
- The **process** of arriving at consensus is vitally important. The COSSABO offers a deeply democratic process, created by the labour movement and capable of institutionalising participatory democracy.
- This will prevent the leaders of the trade union movement from monopolising the debate and foisting on the movement programmes and decisions developed behind closed doors that are not informed by widespread democratic discussion, but rather by sectional, partisan and personal interests. The programme must be subject to widespread discussion and not just ratified because the leaders have proposed it.

The **National Workers' Union** submits the following draft proposal for consideration by the COSSABO for inclusion in the short term programme of self defence:

The vast majority of workers in T&T are not organised into unions. This is the Achilles heel of the labour movement. It leaves hundreds of thousands of workers subjected to the most grievous and unconscionable exploitation; is a source of division within the working class and saps the potential strength of the labour

movement.

- The trade union movement must quickly and systematically invest ample resources on a sustained campaign to organise the un-organised including the thousands of so-called temporary and casual workers who fall within unionised bargaining units.
- A minimum floor of entitlements must be legislated to apply to all workers. This must include: an annual review of the minimum wage which should be no less than two thirds of the national average wage; sick pay; vacation leave; overtime payments; payment for public holidays; the right to have a pay slip; the right to union representation inclusive of the grievance procedure; the right to a written contract; service pay for termination of any kind; the establishment of a severance fund to be funded by employers, its coverage should include loss of employment when a company closes down; unemployment relief to be administered by the NIS.
- Legal discrimination against domestic workers must be abolished.

Over the years, a web of repressive legislation has been weaved around and entrapped the trade union movement. Foremost among them is the *Industrial Relations Act* which was passed by the PNM government during a state of emergency. It was designed to cripple the trade unions in our quest to serve our members. Among the provisions in the *Industrial Relations Act* that are particularly repressive are:

- essential services and essential industries which deny workers the right to strike and deny workers freedom of association
- The long, drawn out bureaucratic process of recognition sometimes takes years before workers can gain a recognition certificate. If 20% of workers in a workplace join a union a ballot should be automatically triggered. No recognition claim should take more than 3 months. The Recognition Board should be abolished and the recognition process monitored by the Ministry of Labour.
- Restrictions on the right to strike.
- Decertification of unions. Neither employers nor the state should be able to initiate decertification proceedings against unions.
- Employer challenges to individual workers being represented by unions. This should be abolished.

The *Industrial Relations Act* should be repealed! The *Workmen's Compensation Act* should also be repealed and replaced with the long promised *Employee Injury and Disability Act* which should bring compensation for work related injury and death into line with contemporary practice.

We recognise the indispensable role played by small farmers in the struggle to develop a situation of food sovereignty which is vital to attaining true independence. We also pay tribute to the historically close relationship of small farmers to the labour movement.

We propose for inclusion in the workers self defence programme: long term security of tenure for those who work the land; adherence to a rational land use policy based on strict zoning of land; reducing the costs of agricultural inputs (seeds, fertiliser, equipment etc.); guaranteeing decent prices to farmers; creating a system of agriculture intelligence; developing a network of access roads, instituting appropriate irrigation, land preparation and maintenance systems; re-activating research facilities and programmes involving the development of seed banks, plant plasma research etc.; using indigenous technology to develop foods that would assist in breaking the stranglehold of the transnational grain suppliers; moving from export oriented production (monocrop) to Caribbean self sufficiency (polyculture).

We propose the repeal of the *Summary Offences Act*, which is the biggest obstacle to the enjoyment of freedom of assembly as stated in Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states: "*Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association*". Even the neo-colonial constitution of T&T recognises as a fundamental human right and freedom that of assembly and association. Yet the Act which was passed in 1921 to suppress the growing working class movement which had called T&T's first general strike in 1919 placed in the hands of the police the power to decide who can hold and who can speak at a public meeting and who can hold or participate in a public march or whether such a meeting or march should be held at all.

18th April 2010