

Labour Day: A Movement of Liberalization to a Celebration of Volunteerism

The international Labour Day movement was first born out of a struggle to free workers who suffered under extreme conditions of repression, exploitation and racism during the nineteenth century. Since its birth in 1880, many countries have set aside the 1st of May in honour of the Labour movement. In Jamaica however, Labour Day is celebrated on the 23rd of May.

Prior to this, in 1961, Jamaica had historically celebrated what was known as Queen Victoria Day (Birthday), otherwise known as Empire Day on the 24th of May. However, after gaining Independence, Norman Washington Manley proposed a Bill in Parliament which sought to put an end to the celebration of Queen Victoria Day. In its stead, the country would observe May 23 as a public holiday which marked the anniversary of the working class movement in Jamaica in the year 1938. Labour Day was mainly celebrated by trade unions across Jamaica until 1972 when the then Prime Minister of Jamaica, the Most Honourable Michael Manley gave added meaning to this national holiday by making it a day of voluntary labour.

On that day, May 23, 1972, thousands of Jamaicans across the island spent their time in voluntary service on community development projects. Private sectors and doctors participated by volunteering their services to hospitals and conducting free operations. The day also saw tourists who were vacationing in North Coast Hotels participating in these projects. To celebrate Jamaica's first Labour Day, the Most Honourable Michael Manley and his wife, Beverly Manley, hosted a Labour Day concert on the grounds of Jamaica House which was a gesture of thanks to the people of Jamaica for devoting a portion of their public holiday to do voluntary community development work.

Today, Labour Day is a celebration of volunteerism across Jamaica. Its three main objectives seek to:

- Enhance dignity of labour by contributing to improving the environment
- Inspire the pride and spirit of community development
- Encourage the notion of solidarity, with an emphasis of communities working and sharing together.

As such, Jamaicans across the country volunteer their time, money, and effort on May 23 to participate in activities which includes the improving of public spaces, the building of churches, homes and schools as well as general painting and repairs.

However, the question of whether or not the sense of volunteerism still resonates throughout this generation edges on one's mind. Is the true meaning of Labour Day being observed in today's society? Are citizens, especially young people within the society still upholding the values of Labour Day which involves giving back to one's community?

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