

**Address by Senator the Hon Jennifer Baptiste-Primus,
Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development**

on the occasion of

**The Sub-regional Trade Union Conference on the Future of
Work**

**Organised by The Bureau for Workers' Activities of the
International Labour Organisation in cooperation with the
ILO Office for the Caribbean.**

**Subject: The Future of Work We Want: Workers' Perspectives
from the Caribbean**

Hilton International and Conference Center

Port of Spain, Trinidad,

14-15 February, 2019

Mr. Guy Ryder, Director-General at the International Labour Organisation

Ms. Maria Helena André, Director of the Bureau for Workers' Activities

Ms. Sharan Burrow, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation

Mr. Wayne Chen, President of the Caribbean Employers' Confederation

Ms. Jennifer Isaacs-Dotson, President of the Caribbean Congress of Labour

Ms. Natalie Willis, Acting Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development

Representatives of Employer and Worker Organisations from across the region

Representatives of Regional and International Institutions and Organisations

Government Officials

Esteemed Colleagues

Members of the Media.

I am very grateful to have been invited to address the inauguration session of your Sub-regional Trade Union Conference on the Future of Work.

The Conference takes place some two and a half years following the National Forum on the Future of Work which was staged by the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, on August 29, 2016. The feature address was delivered by Dr. Camille Wardrop Alleyne, Aerospace Engineer, NASA.

Ladies and gentlemen, as Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development I am heartened and encouraged that the dialogue continues: so relevant and indeed critical it is to the future welfare and wellbeing of each and every Citizen of Trinidad and Tobago and indeed the wider Caribbean Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We should all take comfort in the fact that this Conference, organised by the Bureau for Workers' Activities of the International Labour Organisation in cooperation with the ILO Office for the Caribbean, has identified as its foremost objective: the creation of an opportunity for workers' organizations, economists, academics and representatives of governments to discuss the profound changes sweeping the world of work and to develop strategies on the Future of Work with a view to channelling these developments towards the cause of social justice.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Evidence abounds that, even as we sit here today, societies throughout the world are conscientiously preoccupied in putting in place exigencies to prepare for substantial levels of abnormal and unprecedented disruptions to their workforce and the modes of performing work which we have for generations grown to take for granted.

The irony is that we have no choice. For the choice has been thrust upon us principally, but not exclusively, as a result of the bewildering advances in science and technology and exponentially incontrollable automation. How modern day civilisation deals with this disruptive workplace phenomenon which has already begun to affect the lifestyles and livelihood of a burgeoning world population of more than 7 billion people is the challenge that currently lies defiantly on the Caribbean doorstep.

In the US for example, studies showed just about six years ago that between 47% and 60% of workers had jobs at high risk of potential automation.

Of course these numbers will vary from country to country. But, of one thing we can all be sure, and it is this: it is that no Country will be spared the disruptive impact of what the future of work has in store for us. How we in Trinidad and Tobago and indeed the Caribbean Region manage this era of drastic workforce transformation will undeniably test the dexterity of our people and the sensitivity and flexibility of Labour Leaders to adapt to

modifications which the future of work will inevitably impose upon all of us.

For Ladies and Gentlemen, like it or not, the era of robotics is already upon us.

US experts predict that Robots will create 15 million new jobs in the U.S. over the next 10 years, as a direct result of automation and artificial intelligence: an equivalent of 10% of their workforce, and that robotics will also eliminate 25 million jobs over the same period.

In fact it is reported that Robots are already replacing jobs as Couriers and soon they could take over the jobs of Farmers, Taxi drivers, Customer Service and office assistants, health care workers, warehouse workers, Journalists and truck drivers using self-driving trucks. An autonomous truck has already been sent on a 120 mile journey to deliver goods.

China and Japan are among developed economies competing aggressively in the leadership race for top position in the automation and artificial intelligence world. These are today's facts of life that we cannot afford to ignore, overlook or sidestep. We do so at our own peril.

How we adjust our way of life, our culture of work to meet the daunting disruptions which this international phenomenon imposes upon us will stamp the mark of distinction with which the world at large will behold our Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When all the niceties and the excess fat melts away, these are the harsh realities of the future of work which beckons and which, over the next two days, we expect your deliberations will address: seeking to find practical solutions ahead of the inevitabilities of adaptation to drastic and almost revolutionary workforce change: unparalleled change which poses a monumental threat to the maintenance of a peaceful and harmonious working environment.

Let's not fool ourselves: Change brings about fear: fear of the unknown, and more so, change over which we have no control brings about higher levels of fear and by virtue of this, it brings about higher levels of disharmony, division and disruption even when it is change for the better.

Here is how former President of the United States, Barack Obama put it:

President Obama noted that “technology is making many sectors of the economy far less labour intensive and far more capital intensive. He saw it as “a major problem in both the developed and developing worlds”. He believed that, “since work is about dignity and status in society as well as income, he said, this is one of the things he worries about the most.”

President Obama went on to say that

“The issue of both inequality within countries and between countries is absolutely critical,” adding that if we don't pay

attention to the increasing divisions that exist there “will be a backlash and resistance to technology and change and globalization because people will feel left behind”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have taken the initiative to share with you these sentiments expressed by President Obama specifically because I have noted a similarity of concerns reflected among the issues listed for discussion and dialogue in your programme of over the next two days.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The history of modern day civilisation will show that men and women of renown came up with philosophies, ideas, inventions and innovations all in search of an improved standard of living for all. They put their best feet forward in discovering how best we can add value to the world we live in.

Let us all face it, the world in which we live today is dictated by scientific advancement in all Sectors and this has defined our existence for decades.

Our ancestors have run their leg and today the baton has been passed to our generation to plot the way forward. We can do our best only on the basis of collaborative effort and arriving at consensus in an environment ready-made for free and forthright exchange of views and ideas. And this is what this ILO Conference offers us today: an opportunity to put our most profound thoughts and ideas on the front burner as we share a stage emboldened with the determination to add our contribution to this forever-changing modern day civilisation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's been done many times before and we can do it again. World history is replete with the evolution of mankind from the prehistoric Stone Age through to the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, through to the Age of Discovery, the

Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment, the Atomic Age, the Industrial Revolution, the era of mechanisation and now the Information and Communication Age. And through them all, mankind has emerged triumphant, facing the changes which each era imposed and with the grace of Almighty God emerging from each with a higher appreciation of self and a deeper understanding of life and the vagaries of its complex vicissitudes.

Yes Ladies and gentlemen we have done it before, many times before, and the time has once more come for us to do it again. The future of work now rests in our delicate hands.

My Government's desire is, that above all things, you keep uppermost in mind the overarching Vision of the highest ground: that, over the next two days, you focus upon what is meaningful, what is right and what is best for the people of Trinidad and Tobago and, in doing so, you do not lose sight of what is meaningful, what is right and what is best for all the people of the Caribbean Region and the world at large.

I thank you for the opportunity to have addressed you this morning and wish you well in all your deliberations.

May Almighty God Bless you all and bless the Nation of Trinidad and Tobago.