

A NUPW VIEW

Flexitime – What's Next ?

Within the Barbados Public Service flexi-time is not new. In the early 90s when it was introduced at the National Insurance Department it was viewed as a fundamental departure from the existing working arrangements of public workers. More than ten years on it is viewed as a benefit to the workers with the staggering of work hours being introduced in the Personnel Administration Division and the Office of Public Sector Reform at the request of the workers.

Flexi-time, the staggering of work hours, whichever term we choose to use is another form of flexibility in the workplace. Such flexibility can cover an entire conflation of issues encompassing production, technical and organisational flexibility, wage and occupational flexibility, and flexibility in the working relationship. As it regards the management of labour, it accommodates the production needs of the employer and is impacted upon by such factors as new information and communications technology, family commitments, and traffic congestion which is a major headache for public workers, many of who are centralized in and around the environs of Bridgetown.

On closer examination, flexible work arrangements are influenced by the many new management practices being marketed by human resource specialists. These practices have influenced a change in the employment relationship in the public service, manifesting itself in the public sector reform initiative, specifically the PRDS. Under this initiative many workers are given more autonomy, expected to operate in a team environment and assist in the development of more detailed job descriptions for the public service.

An environment for further flexibility and new forms of work organisation is being fuelled and nurtured by cheaper information and control systems. As

respectable trade unionists and industrial relations practitioners there is the need to advocate that workers are not simply passive receptors of change, management initiatives or new policies that are being considered. Though it would seem that where flexible working hours have been implemented there is the impression that it is working well, there is still a need to ensure that any such changes to work arrangements be dependent on the wishes of the employees of the respective department. In such light the NUPW would support the concept based on principle, recognising that such an initiative is not only a response to changes taking place in the public sector, but horrendous traffic jams, the need for timely delivery of services in general and the need to juggle family and other domestic responsibilities. Nevertheless there are a number of concerns that must be highlighted.

At a policy level the public service is viewed as a vanguard of progressive employment policy and practice. For example in the National Insurance Department there is not only evidence of flexibility but also evidence of employment restructuring where cleaning services and security services are contracted out. Similar to the United Kingdom this may be a reflection of the political directorate's drive towards privatization and would be unacceptable and a serious lacuna, a negative reflection on Government's employment policy if such forms of employment restructuring become widespread across the public service.

With the crystallization of the CSME it is understood that the public services of the region are expected to be the principal facilitators of the integration process. It is therefore recognized that for the public service to effect the successful implementation of the CSME a flexible labour force is necessary. However, such flexibility should not be to the detriment of job security and job tenure, but redound to the benefit of the public sector workforce. At the same time, one must be careful that a periphery workforce does not emerge in the public service where part-time work, outwork, freelance, homework and sub-contracting become the norm, at the expense of a dedicated 'core' public sector workforce that delivers a quality service in the face of inadequate resources and political challenges on an ongoing basis.

A periphery workforce is invariably without job security, are less protected from the variances of management and it is their disposability that matters enabling the employer to increase or trim his workforce as changes take place with respect to the demand for labour. For peripheral workers the emphasis moves from employment relationships to contractual relationships where managerial control is emphasized and if the problems stemming from bad control are not addressed there will be fragmentation and substantial loss in efficiency.

It is therefore necessary to ensure that in considering any further flexibilization of the public service, that the NUPW and workers alike are not accepting a short-sighted prescription for the changes and impacts presently occurring in the public sector labour market. Some may argue that the flexibility already in place does not go far enough, but how far is far? The Constitutional Review Commission Report speaks to a dual civil service, is flexi-time eventually going to support a third tier civil service that will be flawed in terms of not supporting good employment practices recognising that such would lend to fragmentation, movement away from training needs – what cannot be bought in? – and emphasizes labour as the problem to be reformed and not considering the fact that there may be organisational shortcomings.

The public service is operating in an uncertain and changing economic environment, and how employees adjust to these uncertainties is an important matter for trade unions. Public workers comprise a large part of the Barbadian middle class and they have made major investments such as home ownership through mortgages or university education for themselves and their children and vehicle purchases. These investments have become central to the way they live and are funded in small increments from a steady stream of income. What will have to change for these workers to continue if their jobs and income become more unpredictable is indeed a question with impending profound implications for society. Such developments would be contrary to the Prime Minister's declared support for decent work.

As already stated any form of flexi-time introduced into the public service must be at the behest of, or with the support of the workers. On this basis the Union will support the initiative in principle, however the negative side of wholesale introduction of flexi-time or flexibility of employment must not only be considered with the utmost caution, but must be advised against.



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