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**ULP: A GOVERNMENT OF, AND FOR, THE WORKING PEOPLE**

**BY**

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**THE ISSUE:**

The Unity Labour Party (ULP) is a party grounded in the working people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. It accordingly espouses a progressive working people's philosophy of advanced social democracy appropriately fashioned to the context of our Caribbean civilisation and the extant political economy of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. It possesses a compelling strategic, many-sided developmental narrative reflective of the philosophy, policies, and programmes which undergird it.

Strategically, the ULP government embarked upon a quest to build a modern, competitive, many-sided, post-colonial economy which is at once national, regional, and global, in our people's interest. The old economy which, among other things, emphasised economic development with the offer of unlimited supplies of cheap labour began to give way to a modern, more sustainable economy resting upon unlimited supplies of knowledge and an increasingly skilled and educated labour force.

Over the past twenty plus years that the ULP has been in government, St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been transformed in every material particular for the better. All groups and classes have experienced significant socio-economic advancement and an enhancement of participatory democracy, civil and political rights. In this context, the working people, including public servants, have advanced magnificently in every material respect, inclusive of education and training; poverty reduction and nourishment; electricity, water, sanitation, and telecommunications services; housing and physical infrastructure (airports, seaports, roads, bridges, coastal and river defences); health and wellness; sports and culture; the empowerment of women and young persons; the protection of the elderly and disadvantaged groups; an enhanced provision of social safety nets; environmental sustainability; a strengthened judicial system and the delivery of justice; good governance and fortified security.

Further, St. Vincent and the Grenadines under the ULP has defended stoutly our nation's sovereignty and independence, led marvelously in the process of deepening and broadening regional integration, and formulated and implemented an activist foreign policy in the interest of our people.

### **SUMMATION OF ACHIEVEMENTS FOR WORKING PEOPLE**

This summation relates not to the general progress experienced by St. Vincent and the Grenadines from which the working people have benefited immensely. The summary which follows focuses on the direct benefits accruing to the working people from the ULP's policies and programmes over the last 20 years in government.

This summary list of direct benefits includes:

- (1) Payment of several millions of dollars to thousands of workers who were denied their just severance payment by the NDP government, including (a) the workers on former government estates at Orange Hill/Rabacca, Wallilabou, and Richmond Vale; (b) the workers at the former state-owned Central Arrowroot Factory at Belle Vue; (c) the transferred workers from Sanitation to CWSA; (d) the workers at the Banana Growers' Association; (e) the workers at the state-owned Diamond Dairy; and so forth.
- (2) Scrupulously ensuring severance payment to all workers in the public sector to whom severance payment is due, for example, transferred or terminated workers at re-organised state enterprises such as the Marketing Corporation, Public Works Department, and local Government workers. Hitherto such workers were left in severance payment limbo under the NDP government.
- (3) Payment on an on-going basis a "compassionate gratuity" to non-pensionable workers in the Central Government who reached retirement age.
- (4) Funding, from January 2003, by the then wholly state-owned National Commercial Bank (now Bank of St. Vincent and the Grenadines) to its workers at the inauguration of their pension scheme up to fifteen years in arrears from 1978, at a cost of \$2 million; thereafter, the pension scheme has been contributory between workers and the Bank; this pension arrangement was more favourable to the workers than the one proposed by CTAWU, the union representing the workers;

- (5) Enacting a new Protection of Employment Act in 2004 which repealed and replaced a 1980 Act by the same name first passed by the SVG Labour Party; this 2004 Act has enhanced workers' benefits, including severance payment; in 2004, the NDP opposed the increase in these benefits on the ground that they were likely to make businesses uncompetitive and too expensive to operate;
- (6) Payment of tax-free bonuses annually from December 2002, until the global economic crash of 2008, to all public sector employees;
- (7) Raising statutory minimum wages for all categories of workers on four occasions in seventeen years; hitherto the NDP government increased minimum wages once in seventeen years;
- (8) Increasing minimum pensions at the National Insurance Services (NIS) four times between 2002 and 2012, and another increase is in the offing; between 1987 and 2001, the former NDP administration increased the minimum pensions only once, in 1999; average pensions have increased from \$44.27 weekly in 2000 to \$149.79 in 2017, an increase of 238 percent;
- (9) Widening the categories and increasing the extent of non-contributory pensions at the NIS for elderly working people (former workers and peasants); the number of non-contributory non-pensioners at the NIS amounted to almost 1,500 in 2019;
- (10) Making contributory pension payments at the NIS to 7,109 pensioners, an increase of 4,229 pensions or 144 percent increase over the number of 2,940 contributory pensioners at the end of the year 2000; total pensions payments for the year 2000 amounted to \$6.52 million, rising to \$50.82 million in 2017, an increase of 679 percent, while contribution income in 2000 was \$17.052 million, increasing to \$61.669 million in 2017 — an increase of 261.6 percent.
- (11) Average annual insurable wage of the NIS contributors in the year 2000 amounted to \$12,058 but rose to \$21,569 in 2018, an increase of 79 percent.
- (12) Presiding over the creation of over 8,000 jobs between March 2001 and the onset of the global economic crisis of 2008, which impacted St. Vincent and the Grenadines negatively; in the immediate post-2008 years there were job losses and a temporary decline in job-creation. The 2012 Census showed that there was an increase in the employed population of some 6,000; the active number of registrants

at the NIS mirrors this movement of gainfully employed persons: In 2000, the number of active NIS registrants was 30,373 (active employees and self-employed), which rose to 38,952 in 2005, declined to 36,491 in 2015, but increased in 2018 to 40,728 active registrants, an increase of 10,355, a reflection of job increases.

- (13) Providing increases in salaries/wages, and allowances in real terms to all categories of central government employees in excess of 40 percent on average for the years 2001 to 2018; the nominal increases amount to 75 percent, on an average. Real salary/wage increases outstripped increases in productivity measured by the level of increase in Gross Domestic Product;
- (14) Implemented a Reclassification Exercise in the Central Government which resulted, among other things, in salary increases of over 60 percent on an average; over 60 percent of the employees were reclassified upwards; none was reclassified downwards;
- (15) Maintaining the annual increment for Central Government employees of approximately two percent of salaries; all other governments in the OECS have removed this annual increment; this annual increment benefits in excess of 50 percent of the employees who are not yet at the top of their salary scales;
- (16) Reduction of the extent of personal taxation on the working people by increasing from \$12,000 in 2001 to \$20,000 in 2018 annually (an increase of over 66 percent) the threshold income upon which no taxes are to be paid; at the same time the top rate of income tax has been reduced from 40 percent to 30 percent;
- (17) Making Nursing Assistants pensionable from October 27, 2015;
- (18) Instituting the Youth Empowerment Service (YES) programme, for young persons between the ages of 16 years and 30 years, which provides one-year job placement and training opportunity for 500 out-of-school persons; monthly stipends are paid; this programme has been in operation continuously from October 2001 to today; this programme has been assessed by the UNESCO as a “best practice” in Latin America and the Caribbean;
- (19) Implementing in 2014, and continuing, the Support for Employment and Training (SET) for 170 college and university graduates on an annual basis; a monthly stipend/wage is paid. The number of SET workers were increase to 500 in 2020. The monthly stipend ranges from \$1,000 for college graduates to \$2,200 for university graduates.

- (20) Instituting a 100-percent mortgage programme (no down-payment) for housing construction for central government employees;
- (21) Presiding over an increase in per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from an average of under \$10,000 in 2000 to over \$22,000 in 2019.
- (22) Removing, legislatively, in 2001 certain unreasonable constraints on freedom of expression and association of Central Government employees by repealing the Public Officers (Conditions of Employment) Act which was on the statute books since 1970; both the SVGTU and the PSU had long complained about this fetter on freedom of expression and freedom of association.
- (23) Facilitating deeper participation of the working people in national governance through representation on the boards of statutory enterprises, and other public enterprises, and generally through other institutional arrangements and consultations;
- (24) Embarking on periodic special public works programmes at least thrice each year to facilitate targeted employment; each of this special works projects amounts to at least EC \$2.5 million;
- (25) Enacting the Occupational Safety and Health Bill to better protect workers at work places;
- (26) Payment of benefits to nurse midwives of over \$1 million in 2019 which had been administratively withheld by error. The Prime Minister himself intervened personally to right this wrong.
- (27) Payments of monthly stipends to nursing students of \$1,200 — paying nurses to study while providing them with a free or highly subsidized education training; “Free” for Associate Degrees in Nursing; highly subsidized for BSc (Nursing) students.
- (28) Massive roll-out of social safety net provisions for workers adversely affected by COVID-19 and the volcanic eruptions. The Budget of 2021 and the Supplementary Budgets of 2020 and 2021 are replete with these benefits and payments for working people, farmers, fisherfolk, and disadvantaged families.
- (29) Protecting the wages/salaries, benefits, and living conditions of all public sector employers — central government and public enterprises — during the COVID pandemic and in the period of the eruptions and ongoing. The public sector workers are the only

category of workers in St. Vincent and the Grenadines whose salaries/wages have not diminished during the period of COVID and volcanic eruptions.

- (30) Maintaining, broadening and strengthening retirement benefits of all government employees through the central government and NIS.
- (31) Improving markedly the physical and other facilities of the workplace environments of public sector employees though, admittedly, in some location more needs to be done and are being done.
- (32) Providing very generous study-leave provisions scholarships, financial assistance (bursaries, grants, economically-disadvantaged student loans) for public sector employees and their children.
- (33) Cutting out discrimination of public sector employees on the ground of race, sex, political opinions, religion, class, creed, or place of origin. Indeed, women, persons from poor and working people's families, and rural folk have advanced magnificently in the public service and state enterprises under the ULP government.
- (34) Advocated constitutional reform to strengthen public accountability, transparency, and openness of government and its institutions, inclusive of the Public Service and Police Service Commissions. The reform proposals were rejected in the 2009 Referendum, to the detriment of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.
- (35) Reformed the laws to bolster accountability, transparency, and openness of government to the benefit of public sector employees and the people as a whole.
- (36) Enhancing markedly the benefits for the working people and their children through a bundle of government programmes including those in education, health, social security, poverty reduction, housing, citizen security, disaster preparedness, physical infrastructure, social development (women, children, elders, youths), sports, culture, regional integration, and foreign policy. Still, as the "Labour" government itself insists, there is much more work to be done.

## **CONCLUSION**

Regional and international organisations, including independent NGOs, and responsible governments globally have hailed St. Vincent and the Grenadines as a country with high quality democracy, the rule of law, civil and political rights,

minimal official corruption (none at the political level of our government over the past 20 years), openness, transparency, and accountability. Our good governance is hailed regionally and globally. These are the unvarnished facts. Assertions to the contrary are political mischief, opposition musings, and falsehoods! Further, these very regional and global agencies and governments have repeatedly attested to the immense socio-economic advances in St. Vincent and the Grenadines under the ULP government!