

National Labour Day 2021

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Monday May 24, 2021 will be celebrated as National Labour Day in Jamaica under the theme 'Stay home, stay safe this Labour Day, clean up your space'. According to Jamaica's Minister of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport, Hon. Olivia Grange, no National Labour Day project will be held this year as Jamaicans are being encouraged to labour at home as the day seeks to promote a clean and healthy environment. She said Jamaicans should use the day to rid their homes of mosquito breeding sites, commence or restart their backyard gardens and plant trees. Minister Grange was delivering a statement in the House of Representatives on May 5, where she said the theme and activities for the day have been developed in keeping with Covid-19 restrictions under the Disaster Risk Management Act.

Minister Grange also used the opportunity to remind Members of Parliament that, in keeping with the practice that was re-established in 2008, the invaluable contribution of the workers of Jamaica would be highlighted in the week leading up to Labour Day, which was designated as "Workers' Week". Activities for Workers' Week 2021 were carried out from Sunday, May 16, 2021 and will culminate on Monday, May 24, 2021. She also highlighted that there would be a commemoration of the contribution of the Right Excellent Sam Sharpe, National Hero, who was martyred on May 23, 1832 as a result of his determination that slavery be abolished. She further stated that Jamaicans have earned the right to not only celebrate the significance of our National Labour Day, but also the opportunity to continue to 'give back' in the spirit of nation building. The holiday is celebrated annually on May 23, but in keeping with the provisions of the Holidays (Public General) Act, if May 23rd falls on a Saturday or a Sunday, the following Monday shall be known as "National Labour Day".

The celebration of National Labour Day also commemorates the 1938 labour rebellion which was a precursor to Jamaica's independence from British rule. In fact it was the settlement of that 1938 unrest that laid the foundations for our country's modern party system. At the time, Alexander Bustamante, who became Jamaica's first prime minister and received a knighthood before ultimately becoming a National Hero, led a strike on the Frome Estate Sugar Plantation after a wage-and-hours dispute. The excitement generated there quickly spread to dockworkers and street cleaners, ultimately producing a general strike that was eventually suppressed by British forces leading to him being jailed for seventeen months and becoming a labour martyr. His cousin Norman Manley, who served as Chief Minister before becoming Jamaica's first premier and decades later a National Hero, helped settle the strike. His actions made him hugely popular which led him to help in organising the People's National Party with the support of the Trade Union Congress (later to become the National Workers' Union). Bustamante, once released, began to organise his own party, and in 1943, strongly backed by the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) which he led, founded the Jamaica Labour Party.

As a member of the then British Empire, Jamaica historically had a public holiday on May 24th to mark Queen Victoria's birthday, known and celebrated as Empire Day. Though it was renamed Commonwealth Day in the 1950s, it is still celebrated as Victoria Day in most regions of Canada. By 1961 though, a year before gaining independence from the United Kingdom, Jamaica no longer saw relevance in the celebration of Empire Day. As a result, and largely

due to the suggestion of its Chief Minister Norman Manley, Empire Day was abolished by the passing of a parliament bill, and replaced with a new holiday called Labour Day, which was to commemorate the labour rebellion of May 23, 1938.

In 1972, motivated by a desire to inspire national unity, Jamaican Prime Minister the Most Honourable Michael Manley started the movement to make Labour Day a day when Jamaicans would get involved in local community projects. It was he who conceptualised the theme 'Put Work into Labour Day' that same year giving birth to National Labour Day as we know it today. Then, he called on the people of Jamaica to understand the importance of labour to nation-building through voluntary community work. This marked the first time Jamaicans were asked to give up a part or all of their public holidays to work on community projects.

In more recent years and despite an eight-year absence of wide scale island-wide National Labour Day projects, the Jamaican government reintroduced themes as a guide for persons to assist in National Labour Day activities. Selecting a theme was meant to foster wider national involvement and solidarity on a wide range of issues including health, the environment, youth, the community, road safety, tree planting as well as greater respect for the elderly and vulnerable in our society. Since then, the governing administration has used the day to appeal to the national pride and dignity of the citizenry as they undertake laborious activities in celebration of National Labour Day. This sees civic groups, corporate entities and individuals around the island organising and executing planned projects of their own, such as the refurbishing of schools, community centres, state institutions and other public and private buildings. Covid-19 notwithstanding, let us ensure to continue this tradition albeit, within our own homes, as we commemorate the fight of our forefathers for the freedom we enjoy.

Written by:

Andre' W. Reid

Events/Communications Consultant

Andre Wayne Enterprise (A.W.E.)