

## 100 fired CEPEP contractors consider legal action

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OVER 100 terminated Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) contractors yesterday turned up at a free legal clinic hosted by Opposition Leader Pannelope Beckles and the People's National Movement (PNM) where plans to take mass legal action against the government were discussed.

A potential class action lawsuit against the ruling United National Congress (UNC) for its decision to terminate all contracts last week was only one avenue discussed by representatives with the fired contractors at the Lisas Gardens Community Centre in Couva.

It follows contractors being informed via letter last Friday that agreements with the CEPEP programme had been ended. The party estimates over 10,700 workers employed by these contractors have, as a result, been placed on the headline.

Speaking to the media after the consultation ended, Beckles called the government's decision 'consistent' with its pattern of behaviour upon assuming power, which she alleged included affecting employees of the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA), the governor of the Central Bank, the Land Settlement Agency (LSA) and other bodies. 'This is not unusual. This is expected, but the bottom line is we have had a meeting this morning and the PNM opposition, the government who would have been there during the time when these contracts were issued, our position is we will do what is necessary to protect the interests of the contractors as well as the interest of the people,' she said.

### 'A wicked act'

Former public utilities minister, PNM chairman Marvin Gonzales, who was also present at the meeting, criticised the timing of the termination, calling it a 'wicked' act and stating that it would affect the country's most vulnerable.

'Interestingly, this has happened as we bring an end to the school term, where a lot of our mothers are single parents depending on a simple wage to feed their families and send them to school, etc. One single action by the CEO (of CEPEP) and as a result of that their lives have been placed in extreme turmoil,' he said.

He said that the meeting was convened to inform stakeholders that the PNM was assembling a legal team that would defend them and the impacted employees. He said the team would offer free legal services to allow them to be properly represented and to prevent the government from proceeding what he said they believed was an illegal act.

'Keith Scotland, SC, Faris Al-Rawi, SC, St Clair O'Neal, Pannelope Beckles, Marvin Gonzales, we are assembling a team to offer free legal services to all the contractors and ensure that the government is stopped dead in their tracks from proceeding with this very wicked and what we believe is an illegal act.

'This will be a class-action type of lawsuit but we cannot go into any details with respect to the strategy. The attorneys are looking at all the legal avenues that are available. We may have individual actions as well, if persons may have decided to pursue their own course of action. It all depends. We are putting together the strategy and offering it to them,' he said.

He also refuted claims that the PNM had acted similarly upon assuming office in 2015. He said there was no evidence to suggest that any contracts agreed upon by the CEPEP involved breaches of the law.

'That is simply a lie, they have not offered one single evidence to suggest any wrongdoing on the part of a public official. Not one ounce of evidence, it is people just spewing nonsense to mislead the public but they have shown whether the public procurement law has been breached and, of course, it has not been breached. Everything that was done was done with board approval, the approval of the executive of CEPEP and with all of the approvals and requirements within the public procurement law. If they have evidence that these things were breached then come forward and say so, but you can't just make attempts to mislead your supporters and throw red meat to them,' he said.

**Al-Rawi: PNM will take every step possible** Also speaking to the media, former minister of local government, PNM public relations officer (PRO) Faris Al-Rawi, said the action will not be limited to a class-action lawsuit but will involve individual action and other avenues.

He said the party had a capable team of attorneys and intended to take every step possible through the law.

'The most vulnerable, remember CEPEP workers received \$120 a day and \$1,400 a fortnight. To put 10,700 workers from CEPEP, 140 change agents, 10 executives in WASA, 400 WASA workers, 4,700 forestry workers, nearly 5,000 URP workers, 900 workers in one Regional Health Authority (RHA), 500 in another, in a mere two months.

'We are looking at over 12,000 people. The leader (Pannelope Beckles) said something important today, 'if you multiply the effect of families, if you put 12,000 people and multiply it by five dependants... clearly they intend to savage this nation', he said.

He also referred to the United National Congress (UNC) news conference which was also held yesterday morning, noting what he said was silence on the part of former union leaders who are now involved in the government.

'I know there was a press conference held a short while ago which, from the information reaching me, not even an apology or an ounce of consideration has been offered. Mr (Ernesto) Kesar, a union leader, Mr (Clyde) Elder, Mr Leroy Baptiste, a union leader, Mr (Ancel) Roget a union leader, one thing is that they are all very well-mannered because our mothers and fathers taught us not to speak when your mouth is full. It is clear that their mouths are filled with what someone referred to as red meat...' said Al-Rawi.

