

Port workers resume duties after talks with SWWTU



The Port of Port-of-Spain

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Approximately 25 Port of Port-of-Spain workers who downed tools last week have returned to work. The matter was temporarily resolved after discussions with Seamen and Waterfront Workers' Trade Union (SWWTU) president general Michael Annisette, who also serves as chairman of Port and Maritime Services Limited (PMSL), the company to which the workers are contracted.

Annisette confirmed that 22 to 26 PMSL employees were suspended pending an investigation for not reporting for duty last Friday. However, he stressed no one had been terminated and full operations resumed by Tuesday.

He attributed the unrest to deep-seated frustrations over stagnant wages and poor working conditions, which the workers described as "inhumane."

Annisette pointed to long-frozen container handling fees as a major constraint.

"It's an economic issue, as I tried to explain. It is not that the company wicked and the company bad," he said.

"But the critical thing is that the volume of containers, too, has also dropped and then too, with the introduction of the scanner, it has further dropped and the question of a contract to supply X amount of labour, which we must do.

"Most of the time we are not getting the volume of containers to see about the contractual obligation, which is seven days and two persons per container and there's 15 days."

He said the company has not received an increase in handling fees since 1995 and pledged to seek dialogue with the Minister of Finance, acknowledging the demands of the budget season.

During last week's work stoppage, the company hired temporary labour to fulfil its contractual

obligations with Customs, which Annisette defended.

He explained the action was necessary to avoid disruptions in the movement of essential cargo, including goods for hospitals. However, once talks commenced, tensions were resolved through open dialogue.

On the matter of working conditions, Annisette highlighted rodent infestations, asserting that many images being circulated are outdated. He said efforts are made to sanitise the environment but pest control remains a challenge, particularly due to the proximity of National Flour Mills.

Ventilation is another longstanding concern but he said efforts to provide basic relief such as fans have been blocked by Customs regulations.

“So, our hands are tied,” he explained.

A worker, who spoke on condition of anonymity, confirmed staff resumed work and that Annisette asked for two weeks to address their concerns.

Annisette also weighed in on the retrenchment of thousands of Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) and Forestry Division workers.

Some 10,500 workers were affected after CEPEP terminated over 300 contractors last Friday.

Responding to recent comments from Minister in the Ministry of Public Utilities and former trade unionist Clyde Elder, who referred to the CEPEP dismissals as “collateral damage,” Annisette said, “I would have never made that kind of statement.

It’s not a thousand people, it’s households ...

10,000 workers means about 40,000 people affected.”

He urged Government to reconsider its approach and advocated for a revamp of the CEPEP programme, calling for greater investment in upskilling and long-term employment strategies. He warned against punishing workers for alleged misconduct by contractors or politically connected entities.

“You have to speak truth to power and if something is wrong, even within your house, you have to correct it. If you don’t correct it, what happens to your children? What happens to your household?”