

TSTT blocked

New minister orders freeze on hirings/firings amid impasse with utility's board



Minister in the Ministry of Public Utilities Clyde Elder, left, Public Utilities Minister Barry Padarath, TSTT CEO Kent Western and Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Public Utilities Shivanna Sam during the minister's visit to TSTT House, Port-of-Spain, yesterday. PHOTO COURTESY MINISTRY OF PUBLIC UTILITIES



Former minister Marvin Gonzales

GEISHA KOWLESSAR-ALONZO AND ANDREA PEREZ-SOBERS

Minister of Public Utilities Barry Padarath has mandated the majority state-owned Telecommunications Services of T&T (TSTT) and its wholly owned subsidiary, Amplia, to put a hold on all human resource actions until further notice with immediate effect.

This comes after the board of TSTT refused to resign, Padarath said in an interview with Guardian Media yesterday.

An undated internal memo detailed that the directives applied across all categories of employment —permanent, temporary, part-time, contract, consultancy and contingent workers. The memo was issued by TSTT CEO Kent Western and was obtained by Guardian Media.

Specifically, the memo indicated that TSTT is required to suspend all of the following actions with immediate effect:

- Transfers
- Recruitment
- Promotions
- Demotions
- Separations or terminations
- Salary adjustments

- Contract extensions

“This applies to both new actions and any that are currently in process or pending approval. All such activity is to be paused until formal guidance is provided. As an example, if you have a consultancy form that you were planning to issue or return to a potential consultant today, please hold it until further notice,” the memo added.

In the memo, Western further directed the relevant staff at the telecommunications company, to “please ensure that this directive is communicated and enforced across your respective teams and that internal controls are in place across both TSTT and Amplia to ensure full compliance. I would appreciate confirmation once this has been actioned. Let me know if you need any clarification. Thank you in advance for acknowledgement of receipt.”

On what prompted the move to put a hold on many of TSTT’s human resource functions, Padarath explained that as is customary, usually the board of directors of any state enterprise would offer their resignations after a change in administration following a general election.

“I am yet to receive the resignations of the board of directors that was instituted by the last administration and, therefore, I’ve been visiting all state enterprises that fall under the purview of the Ministry of Public Duties. So, TSTT was no different,” Padarath said.

“I met with the CEO and staff at TSTT yesterday (Monday) and I gave the directive that—seeing that there has been no resignation from the former board that would have been appointed by the People’s National Movement administration—the board is to issue no instruction, company instruction from those who have refused to resign from those positions. So, until the new administration puts in place a board that will handle the day-to-day affairs in tandem with the management of TSTT, it is only right that such decisions taken at a board level to be instituted by the company be halted at this time.”

Asked what he believes may be the reason the board did not resign, the minister said this ought to be directed to those who “refused to resign.”

Padarath said this was “not 100 per cent unusual,” noting that he has received several resignations, including those from the chairs of the Regulated Industries Commission (RIC), Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) and Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission (T&TEC).

The minister added that the board and directors of TSTT seem “to be holding on for one reason or the other.”

“But there are expressed policy deviations from the former administration compared to what this administration will be pursuing and, therefore, I could not in all good conscience allow it to continue, where there’s a directive coming from a board that is not recognised by the incoming government, seeing that there’s a deviation in terms of what our alignments are in terms of policy,” the minister added.

In a WhatsApp message to Guardian Media, Western said, “As you are aware, there has been a change in administration, and we felt it prudent to pause any commitments, whether human or financial, until we have greater clarity on our strategic direction moving forward.”

According to TSTT’s website, the company has a five-member board headed by chairman Anthony Peyson and including Angelo Austin, Wendell Berkley, Annalean Inniss and Cavelle Joseph-St Omer.

Union worried about negotiations

Guardian Media also reached out to Communication Workers’ Union (CWU) president Joanne Ogeer, who said the responsible thing to do by the board should have been to step aside or resign

instead of having their appointments revoked.

“... Right now at TSTT, the only thing that is concerning for me is the halt on all the spending. We have negotiations Friday (16th) and we would want to know if this halt would now impact the collective bargaining period for junior and senior staff,” Ogeer said.

She added that while this might be a responsible move by the Government, it is also impacting negatively on what could happen in the relationship between the union and the company as it pertained to collective bargaining.

Ogeer added that the union “will wait and see” if the board would do the “honourable thing and submit their resignations.”

Former minister: Dangerous act

Meanwhile, former Public Utilities minister Marvin Gonzales is sounding the alarm over what he described as the possible illegal and dangerous political interference into TSTT's affairs.

Speaking to Guardian Media yesterday about Padarath's instructions, Gonzales warned that any political directive influencing TSTT operations, especially in the absence of a legally constituted board, undermines good governance and could set a dangerous precedent.

“Illegal interference, political interference, by the new Public Utilities Minister or the Government into the operations and administration of TSTT is, from my understanding, extremely concerning.

TSTT does not have a legally constituted board, and therefore, any directive of this nature coming from a political figure is very dangerous. It is not good for corporate governance,” Gonzales stated.