

## 'UWI wage talks not minister's role'

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THE Government is not the employer of academic staff at The University of the West Indies (The UWI) and is not a party to their wage agreements.

Therefore, the Minister of Finance does not and cannot negotiate collective agreements with the West Indies Group of University Teachers (WIGUT).

'No minister of finance has ever done this, and no legal framework exists for this. The only role of the Minister of Finance is to advise the Administration at UWI on how much funding the Government can afford to provide to The UWI on an annual basis.

'This is because The UWI does not generate sufficient income to pay its expenses and relies on the Government for a subvention, which is currently more than \$500 million annually,' Finance Minister Colm Imbert stated in a media release yesterday.

Imbert said the Government has already indicated how much additional funding it could provide to The UWI administration for the settlement of this wage dispute, namely \$79 million in backpay and an additional \$12 million in recurrent expenditure.

He added that if the dispute resolution process arrives at a different amount, then the administration at The UWI will have to manage its resources carefully.

Imbert was responding to an article in the *Express* yesterday in which WIGUT president Dr Indira Rampersad called on Imbert to refrain from playing political football with its wage negotiation.

She was commenting on Imbert's rejection of its alleged demand of a 24% wage increase over the negotiating period 2014-2017 in the House of Representatives last Friday. She was speaking on TV6's *Morning Edition* programme on Monday.

According to Imbert, however, WIGUT seems to be unaware of who their employer is, and with whom they should negotiate terms and conditions of employment. He further stated that the media too, as is often the case, have not researched this matter and have regurgitated verbatim the inaccurate statements made by the union and Opposition MPs. Imbert said it was necessary to correct misinformation put into the public domain by Opposition MP for Couva South Rudy Indarsingh, who demanded the Minister of Finance take the WIGUT wage dispute to the Industrial Court.

'Apart from the fact that the Minister of Finance is not the employer of the academic staff at the UWI, and, therefore, would have no locus standi in any application made to the Industrial Court in this matter, as a former senior trade union leader, the Opposition MP for Couva South must know, inter alia, that under the Section 2(3) (c) of the Industrial Relations Act of 1972, 'no person shall be regarded as a worker, if he is a member of the teaching service as defined in the Education Act, or is employed in a teaching capacity by a University or other institution of higher learning', 'said Imbert.

For the last 52 years WIGUT has had no recourse to the Industrial Court to settle its wage disputes. In that context, it is disturbing and disappointing that the labour spokesman for the Opposition UNC could be so unaware of the law and the factual matrix associated with this matter, he added.

Imbert explained that the dispute resolution procedures he referred to in Parliament last Friday were the internal grievance procedures outlined in the 'Rules for Academic Staff

and Senior Administrative Staff and Professional Staff' published by The UWI in May 2015.

'For the avoidance of doubt, the Minister of Finance is not involved in that dispute resolution process and cannot be, since those are the internal rules and internal grievance procedures of the UWI,' Imbert said.

In Parliament last Friday, Imbert said if the Government were to accept the salary proposals from WIGUT, the backpay retroactive to March 2024 would be \$701 million.

'I do not think it is prudent to impose a burden of backpay of \$701 million on the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago,' he said.

**Torturous and cumbersome process** Asked yesterday for his take on the wage negotiation process, former UWI principal (2008-2016) Prof Clement Sankat described it as torturous and cumbersome.

He suggested it should be scrapped and replaced with something similar to the Salaries Review Commission, where about three people sit and make and iron out the various recommendations.

Sankat said: 'I was sitting in the chair as principal and I have to negotiate with WIGUT.

Now what happens. Really the principal could only receive what WIGUT is telling.

'The principal hardly has any ability to negotiate because the principal has to go through this torturous route; and guess what, it takes sometimes a year or two years to hear from them.

'This is the government route now, CPO, Minister of Finance, before you come back.

'So, in the meantime you get very frustrated people. You get people who are not getting their increases and, in a way, backpay is being accumulated because the process is long and slow.'

He added: 'But let me tell you something-it is the principal who feels the heat, because it is the principal who interacts with WIGUT. They do not go to the minister. The minister does not come to them.

'They are hiding in a corner and sending directives, but you are principal and have to take the heat of the staff.'



'ONLY ADVISING ON FUNDING': Colm Imbert