

United We Stand - Divided We Fall



Brother Robert Richard Randolph Johnston

April 4, 1932 – January 15, 2014

Bermuda Industrial Union President, 1964 - 1974



GOVERNMENT OF BERMUDA

Ministry of Home Affairs

Office of the Minister

January 16, 2014

Mr. Chris Furbert
President
Bermuda Industrial Union
49 Union Square
Hamilton HM 11

Dear Mr. Furbert,

Condolences on the Passing of Robert Johnston

I am writing to express my condolences on the passing of Mr. Robert Johnston.

The strength of the Bermuda Industrial Union was achieved through the pioneering efforts of men like Mr. Johnston. His commitment to worker's rights and to building a society that reflected the importance of organized labour was unwavering.

Through a lifetime of service to the trade union movement, Robert Johnston's name will be remembered with those men and women who sacrificed much in support of others.

On behalf of the Ministry of Home Affairs I offer my condolences to his widow, his family and the Bermuda Industrial Union members and friends.

Sincerely,



Sen. The Hon. Michael M. Fahy, JP
Minister of Home Affairs

Brother Robert R. Johnston became President of the Bermuda Industrial Union after Dr. E.F. Gordon, our first leader and President. Bro. Johnston held that position for 10 years. During that period he led the Union through one of its most tumultuous times. Foremost amongst those times was the strike at BELCO in 1965.

The February 2, 1965 BELCO dispute and riot goes down time that Bro. Johnston, along with other stalwarts was arrested and imprisoned. Some of our stalwarts served time as political prisoners. Arising out of that disturbance at BELCO, the Union adopted four heroes who were imprisoned for fighting for workers' rights and justice. Those imprisoned were Kenny Paul, the late George DeSilva, the late Kervin Ratteray and the late Vivian Ming. These are the Union Members who along with Bro. Johnston, who made the ultimate personal, sacrifice!

Under Bro. Johnston's leadership, the Union began with a membership of 300. In time that figure peaked to 7,000. This drastic increase in membership was a direct result of the numerous crises experienced by the Union together with the energy spent organizing new members. This was a period when there was a great need for workers to organize and fight for their rights. The result was that a militant Union developed under the Johnston leadership.

From a broader point of view, there were a number of racial matters that had to be dealt with. Racism was prevalent throughout the world, in particular, in the US, The Republic of South Africa, Rhodesia, and, of course, Bermuda. During the era of the 60s, the world produced leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Dr. E.F. Gordon and others.

Globally the Black man had to struggle; he was an exploited member of the human race. During this time, the world was faced with divisiveness based on religion, race and tribalism. The BIU, therefore, was not only faced with Bermuda's problems but the global problems for a lack of human rights.

The BIU, during Bro. Johnston's terms of office, fought to increase wages and improve working conditions for its members. The Union was faced with a social difference between the employer class and the working class in that when the Union arrived at the negotiating table, on one side sat an all-White delegation while on the other side of the table was an all-Black negotiating team, save for Dr. Barbara B. Ball, another stalwart of the Labour movement.

From the time that Bro. Johnston was leading the Union, our country has gone, to some extent, from strength to strength. I emphasize though that the country was nowhere near providing the people with equal rights and justice for all. This is a challenge that unions, churches and politicians continue to face.

In summary, Bro. Johnston brought our Union and its members through a tumultuous period. His leadership could be credited with providing better wages and conditions of employment for the peoples of Bermuda. We owe Bro. Johnston our deepest gratitude and appreciation for the personal sacrifices he gave during his term as President and his wisdom during his tenure as Union Organizer.

I would like to personally send our sympathies to Robert's dear wife, Nell and his broader family. As well, I give my sympathy to the Bermuda Industrial Union at the loss of one of its most outstanding leaders.

Submitted by Bro. Ottiwell A. Simmons

The passing of **Brother Robert Johnston**, was a shock to most of us who knew Robert not only as a workmate and a dear friend but also as an avid skin diver. IN my own case, I knew Robert as a classmate in Temperance Hall primary school, as a neighbour when I lived in a cottage behind Bethel Church, and as a fellow executive of the Bermuda Industrial Union which employed both of us for many years.

My memory of Temperance Hall is highlighted by occasions when someone tried to bully Robert. This bullying probably happened more often than I remember. After all, Robert and his several brothers had "Good Hair". This was hair that was naturally curly or straight. Hence the challenges to Robert probably occurred more often than I am aware.

However, of far more importance than the physical appearances of Robert was a strong native intelligence that also seemed to be a fundamental characteristic of the Johnston family. This was reflected in Robert in terms of the speed with which he "learned his trade" which was plumbing, and the respect he earned at the Kindley Air Force Base where he was employed in the early stages of his career.

I lost track of Brother Robert between 1953 and 1965 during which time I was working as a statistician for the Canadian Government and he was forging a career as a prominent trade Unionist. I returned to Bermuda during 1965, during the same year that Brother Robert and others were thrown into prison following their refusal to stop picketing the BELCO. This action had the result of creating Bermuda's most violent industrial dispute in February 1965. Also of equal importance, the dispute led Governor Lord Martonmere to remove completely the colour bars in employment in the Bermuda Government. In fact to prove his seriousness, the governor came to Canada to persuade me to take the newly created position of Government Statistician. Hence, all non white civil servants owe a debt to Brother Robert as president of the Bermuda Industrial Union for removing wide spread segregation in government employment.

I will remember Robert fondly as not merely an outstanding Trade Unionist but also as a leader who was prepared to put his freedom on the line in his pursuit of justice and fair play for all Bermudians.

January 22nd, 2014 by Brother Calvin Smith

Memories of Brother Robert Johnston

The Bermuda Industrial Union is mourning the passing of former president, Brother Robert Johnston who passed away on Wednesday, January 15, 2014.

According to Brother Ira Philip, in "The History of the Bermuda Industrial Union, "Brother Johnston was 16 years old when he joined the BIU in 1948. He was then being trained as a plumber by his father, Derrick 'Shack' Johnston, a plumbing contractor engaged in the post World War Two renovation of the Elbow Beach Surf Club. 'Shack' was an ardent 'Gordonite'. The men on his job were all union members. They were extremely political, and their absorption in the excitement of the historic 1948 General Election proved infectious to young Johnston.

"Suffice it to say, Brother Robert got an early start and good grounding in the labour movement. When interviewed by this author in 2001, he was aged sixty-nine, and still going strong as the long-functioning Union Organizer. During his unbroken fifty-one-year BIU membership, he had served under Mr. Martin T. Wilson from 1962 to 1964, as Vice-President. When the Governor appointed Mr. Wilson to the Upper House of Parliament known then, as the Legislative Council, Robert was elected President. He served in that office for the next nine years.

In 1959, while working at his trade at the U.S. Air base at Kindley Field, Johnston and Winston York, with some encouragement from their American colleagues, undertook to unionise fellow plumbers. At their first meeting in the old, original headquarters building on Union Street, they formed a Plumbers Division, with Johnston as its President. He became President of the Amalgamated Building and Construction Division of the BIU in 1962.

"February 2, 1965 is a red-letter day in the annals of the BIU. It marked the climax of one of the Union's most celebrated disputes, when the police, and hundreds of workers clashed in what was known as the BELCO Riot. Basically, it was a recognition dispute between the BIU and the Bermuda Electric Light Company (BELCO).

"Many meetings were held, and after mediation by the Labour Relations Officer, the talks broke down, opening the way for strike action against BELCO.

President Robert Johnston recalled, that what brought the dispute to a head, was the decision of BELCO's board chairman and chief negotiator, Sir John Cox, to take a trip to England, and during his absence none of the other team members would assemble without him.

As a result of the "BELCO riot", Brother Robert and others appeared in Hamilton Magistrates Court and charged with unlawful assembly, besetting premises and obstruction. Senior Magistrate Sedgwick found Brother Robert guilty and fined him 300 pounds to be paid immediately. He was also bound over in the sum of 300 pounds with three sureties in like amounts.

Brother Johnston protested his innocence, and when he defiantly said he would not be paying one penny, he was ordered to be taken away. He recalled "I was locked up in one of the cells. Thirty minutes later the cell door opened. I thought they were bringing me a mattress or something to sleep on. They took me back to court, where the Magistrate said he had mis-directed himself in law in demanding immediate payment of the fine, so I was released to appear on a date to be fixed."

"When I emerged from the court, I discovered the streets outside were jam packed with people. I had no idea they were there. I am sure they have an effect on the magistrate in releasing me. The crowds were cheerful upon seeing me, which I gathered



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was in contrast to their threatening manner beforehand. We all left there and went to the Devonshire Recreation Club – the Rec.”

“We stayed there for a week or more. Some of the guys went fishing to help feed the people; other food was coming from all direction we had some of the best chef-ing in our lives as we staked out at the club.

Every morning for the next nine days, a convoy set out from the club for the Government Secretariat (now Cabinet Office). There, we had to deal with the Four Knights: Sir Bayard Dill, Sir Harry Butterfield, Sir Henry Tucker and Sir John Cox. The one person was tough, and caused things to be prolonged, was Sir John. He was a hardheaded old codger. Sir Harry, all he was doing was holding his big head in his hands. We will always remember Sir Bayard saying ‘Don’t kill the goose that laid the golden egg.’ That all he kept saying. We replied we just want a big of the golden egg, and, Sir Henry, in his sort of quiet way, tried to see where he could bring a compromise.

Each day the Union’s negotiating team was given an escort. So we kept going back there day after day and didn’t get very far. Finally the Government called on the Colonial Office in Londo, which sent to Bermuda Mr. George Foggan. He had a respectable reputation both among unions and employers throughout the Commonwealth for his diplomatic skills and success in resolving industrial disputes in Britain and the colonies. We called on the National Workers Union of Jamaica, who sent their president, our friend Mr. Tussey Kelly. Along with the Governor, the three tried to mediate a settlement.

“Tussey made some slight gains, conceding some of the very things Ottie and I had turned down. After a while he told us, ‘that’s best I can do for you, fellows. “We told him it wasn’t good enough for us, but he sell it to the people if he wanted to. Tussey, Okay I will take it to the people. When we to the meeting Tussey all of a sudden developed laryngitis. He said ‘Boys, my voice has just left me. I have done so much talk. You and Ottie will have to do it. It had been a long strike, the workers were tired and as we proceeded to tell them what our reservations had been and what Tussey and the Governor had worked out, the meeting showed a willingness to accept, and at one point cheered. Well, we had never seen laryngitis disappear so quickly. Tussey, observing the mood said, ‘Okay bos, I will take over from here!’ He got up there with a clear voice as ever explaining and this is what I told them, blah, blah.” Here was a man who was afraid to deliver in the first instance, and when we got the agreement accepted, he reined in for the credit.

On Friday, February 19, 1965 an agreement reached at Government Secretariat, was signed between the two parties, and the Electrical workers returned to work on Monday, February 22nd.

In 1974, Robert became Union Organizer, when Ottiwell Simmons, who had held that post for several years, began his long term as Union President.

Subsequently, Johnston undertook many others courses at home and abroad. In 1964, he represented the BIU at the 100th Annual Conference of the TUC. For six years, he served on the General Council of the Caribbean Congress of Labour. It was during Johnston’s tenure as president, that new foundations, with education as the cornerstone, were laid for the growth and development of the BIU.”

Brother Johnston retired as Chief Organiser of the BIU in September 2002.

Note: The above are excerpts from “The History of The Bermuda Industrial Union” by Brother Ira Philip





Hotel Employers of Bermuda

JOHN HARVEY, JP, MBE
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17th January 2013

Mr. Chris Furbert
President
The Bermuda Industrial Union
Union Square
Hamilton HM 12.

Dear President Chris

I was indeed saddened to hear of the recent passing of Brother Robert Johnson, retired and former President and Chief Organizer of the Bermuda Industrial Union.

I considered Robert to be a friend of mine, as shortly after I joined the Hotel Employers of Bermuda in 1978, I met Robert, who said to me "Cap, as long as you have a sense of fairness in you, we will get along".

For many years thereafter, Robert and I presented our side's hotel grievances and while there were some testing times, we always respected each other's position, and on some occasions had a private chuckle about the events.

I also used to see Robert during the weekend summer months on his jet ski, patrolling the shores along Harbour Road, just relaxing and enjoying Bermuda's tranquil waters.

He was a dedicated, faithful and loyal trade unionist, who loved the Bermuda Industrial Union and its members; and he delighted in seeing us March off on our Annual Labour Day March, but I don't think he ever joined us.

Robert made a significant contribution to the growth of the BIU and we will all miss him.

Please convey my sentiments to Robert's family.

Sincerely

John W. Harvey
Chief Executive Officer
Hotel Employers of Bermuda

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TRIBUTE

Brother Robert Johnston

"Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. " Source: **The Buddha**

On behalf of the Officers and members of the Bermuda Public Services Union, we express our heartfelt sympathy to the family of Brother Robert Johnston and to the fraternal family of the Bermuda Industrial Union.

Many workers in Bermuda have paid the price for advancing workers' rights during the turbulent times of the 1960s through to the 1980s. Today we salute Brother Robert Johnston as one of those fearless trade union soldiers.

Those difficult times propelled the former President of the BIU to be ever resourceful by steadfastly and reverently staying the course for social justice and by winning the cause. Despite the threats and adversities inflicted upon union fighters during that era, Brother Johnston stood as a champion of injustice.

Brother Johnston knew the sacrifice for the freedom of association and the toils of fighting for freedom of collective bargaining for Bermudian workers. It is during that reflective period that makes trade unionists value the importance of words and how convictions impact the way people live and die.

Walter Sisulu of the South Africa stated:

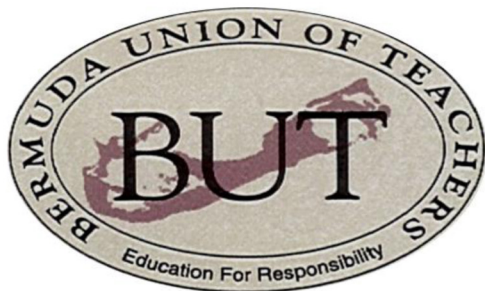
"What counts in life is not the mere fact we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significances of the life we lead."

Brother Johnston, we salute you as a "General" of workers' rights as you rose above all the adversities to achieve success for workers by being dedicated to and passionate about the lives of all workers in Bermuda and internationally.

Your vision will not die as long as trade union foot soldiers continue your fight.

Kevin Grant
President

Edward G Ball Jr, JP
General Secretary



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21st January, 2014

Mr. Chris Furbert
President
Bermuda Industrial Union
49 Union Square
Hamilton HM 12

Dear Mr. Furbert,

The Bermuda Union of Teachers join with worker groups to celebrate the contribution made by Brother Robert Johnson.

Brother Johnson spent most of his adult life fighting for other people – fighting for decency and fair play in the work place. He was truly a drum major for justice! He worked tirelessly, with great passion, putting self aside to ensure that the rights of others were upheld. He truly kept his hand on the plow, did not turn back, and held on!! The Union has benefited from his work, the workers have benefitted from his work, and ultimately, Bermuda has benefited from this great man.

On behalf of the members of the Bermuda Union of Teachers, we send condolences to his immediate family and to his Bermuda Industrial Union Brothers and Sisters, who share in the loss of our dear Brother at this time.

His work was not in vain.

Submitted On Behalf of the Bermuda Union of Teachers!



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EDUCATION FOR RESPONSIBILITY

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