



2nd Report

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON

SOCIAL SERVICES AND

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

An examination of unemployment during the Covid-19 pandemic and the State's capacity to provide support to persons who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic

SECOND SESSION (2021/2022) 12TH PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

2nd REPORT

OF THE

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION**

ON

**AN EXAMINATION OF UNEMPLOYMENT DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC AND THE STATE'S CAPACITY TO PROVIDE SUPPORT TO
PERSONS WHO BECAME UNEMPLOYED AS A RESULT OF THE
PANDEMIC**

Date Laid in the HoR:

Date Laid in the Senate:

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The Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration

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THE COMMITTEE



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VICE-CHAIRMAN



Mrs. Penelope Beckles
MEMBER



Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP
MEMBER



Mr. Rohan Sinanan
MEMBER



Roger Munroe, MP
MEMBER



Mr. Avinash Singh
MEMBER



Mr. David Nakhid
MEMBER

Committee Mandate and Establishment

- 1.1.1 Section 66 of the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago declares, that not later than three months after the first meeting of the House of Representatives, the Parliament shall appoint Joint Select Committees to inquire into and report to both Houses in respect of Government Ministries, Municipal Corporations, Statutory Authorities, State Enterprises and Service Commissions, in relation to their administration, the manner of exercise of their powers, their methods of functioning and any criteria adopted by them in the exercise of their powers and functions.
- 1.1.2 Motions related to this purpose were passed in the House of Representatives and Senate on November 13 and 17, 2015, respectively and thereby established, *inter alia*, the ***Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration***.
- 1.1.3 Standing Order 91 of the Senate and 101 of the House of Representatives outline the general functions of a Committee of this nature. They are as follows:
- a) “To examine Bills and review all legislation relating to the relevant Ministries, departments or bodies or as may be referred to it by the House;
 - b) To investigate, inquire into, and report on all matters relating to the mandate, management, activities, administration and operations of the assigned Ministries, departments or bodies;
 - c) To study the programme and policy objectives of Ministries, departments or bodies and the effectiveness of the implementation of such programmes and policy objectives;
 - d) To assess and monitor the performance of Ministries, Departments and bodies and the manner of the exercise of their powers;
 - e) To investigate and inquire into all matters relating to the assigned Ministries, Departments and bodies as they may deem necessary, or as may be referred to them by the House or a Minister; and
 - f) To make reports and recommendations to the House as often as possible, including recommendations for proposed legislation.”

Powers of the Joint Select Committee

1.1.4 Standing Orders 101 of the Senate and 111 of the House of Representatives outline the core powers of the Committee which include *inter alia*:

- to send for persons, papers and records;
- to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the Senate;
- to adjourn from place to place;
- to report from time to time;
- to appoint specialist advisers either to supply information which is not otherwise readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the Committee's or Sub-Committee's order of reference;
- to communicate with any Committee of Parliament on matters of common interest; and
- to meet concurrently with any other Committee for the purpose of deliberating, taking evidence or considering draft reports.

Membership

1.1.5 The Committee comprises the following members:

1. Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
2. Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Vice-Chairman
3. Mr. Roger Munroe, MP	Member
4. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP	Member
5. Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
6. Mrs. Penelope Beckles-Robinson	Member
7. Mr. David Nakhid	Member
8. Mr. Avinash Singh	Member

Change in Membership

1.1.6 By resolution of the Senate on January 12, 2021, Mr. Avinash Singh was appointed a Member of the Committee in lieu of Ms. Allyson West.

Secretariat Support

1.1.7 The following officers were assigned to assist the Committee:

1. Mr. Julien Ogilvie	-	Secretary
2. Mr. Brian Lucio	-	Assistant Secretary
3. Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	-	Researcher
4. Ms. Nicole Brown	-	Researcher

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ABBREVIATIONS

AWU	Amalgamated Workers Union
ACAWU	Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union
BIGWU	Banking Insurance and General Workers Union
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MOL	Ministry of Labour
MSDFS	Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
THA	Tobago House of Assembly
TTCSI	Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries
TTMA	Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1.1. At its 6th meeting held on April, 21, 2021, the Committee resolved to inquire into the hybrid learning system proposed by the Ministry of Education in response to the COVID-19 crisis in Trinidad and Tobago. The Committee agreed on the following inquiry objectives:

Objective 1: To examine the trends in unemployment and job losses in the private and public sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objective 2: To assess the unemployment relief strategies and programmes of the State during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objective 3: To examine the proposed strategies of the State to stimulate job creation and employment opportunities to counteract the adverse economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objective 4: To examine the changes in the operations of the private sector to sustain business during the COVID-19 pandemic

2.1.2. The Committee acquired both oral and written evidence based on the objectives listed above. Oral evidence was received during two (2) public hearings held with various stakeholders (*See Appendix I*) on November 17, 2021 and December 8, 2021. Some of the significant issues highlighted during the inquiry were:

- i. The criteria for accessing unemployment support from the State;
- ii. The net employment losses and gains experienced in each sector;
- iii. The challenges experienced with disbursing grants and other support;
- iv. The need for Private Sector businesses to become compliant with NIS payments on behalf of employees;
- v. Labour disputes and Industrial Relations matters arising out of the pandemic; and
- vi. The need for accurate data on the effectiveness of training opportunities provided by the State.

2.1.3. The Committee looks forward to reviewing the Minister's response to this Report, which becomes due, sixty (60) days after it is presented to the Houses of Parliament.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

OBJECTIVE 1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- A. The Ministry of Labour should conduct a comprehensive assessment of Business Continuity Plans formulated and employed by State Enterprise, Statutory Bodies and other public sector entities with a view to collating and publishing the successful strategies which were applied and the key lessons learned. Efforts should be made to complete this exercise by the last quarter of 2022.
- B. The Ministry of Labour, The Ministry of Trade and Industry and The Ministry of Planning and Development (CSO) should collaborate to conduct an analysis of job gains made during the Covid-19 pandemic to complement previous research done on economic diversification in Trinidad and Tobago.
- C. The Ministry of Digital Transformation should conduct an assessment of the sectors that experienced employment gains and determine how the use of technology influenced employment retention. This knowledge can then be used to develop technology-based solutions to employment retention in other sectors.
- D. The Ministry of Labour and the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association should compare data on job losses in the Manufacturing Sector to develop a more accurate assessment of job losses in that sector. This comparative analysis should be executed before the end of 2nd quarter of 2022.

OBJECTIVE 2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- A. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the Ministry of Finance should collaborate with the Ministry of Digital Transformation to improve their application processes. During an inquiry into Work from Home arrangements in the public service during the pandemic, the Committee became aware of the project works to be executed to effect digitization and digitalization in the public service 2022. We trust that the digitalisation of manual application process will be prioritised among these projects.

- B. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services should conduct an assessment of the effectiveness of its communication strategies inclusive of public views in order to improve its information dissemination systems and processes. Efforts should be made to complete this assessment by the end of the 2nd quarter of 2022.
- C. As part of its Ministerial Response to this Report, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services should provide the Committee with an update on outstanding payments owed to eligible citizens who applied for assistance.

OBJECTIVE 3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- A. The Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Planning and Development should collaborate on conducting an assessment on the rate of job creation during the Covid-19 pandemic; this study should be commenced in the current fiscal year (2021/2022).
- B. The Ministry of Labour should conduct an evaluation on the impact of state-sponsored training programmes on employment opportunities for trainees during the Covid-19 pandemic; This may entail selecting a sample of participants and tracking their experience interfacing with the job market during the pandemic.
- C. The Ministry of Labour should conduct a targeted survey on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment and employability of university graduates who graduated during the period 2020-2022.
- D. The Ministry of Labour should conduct an assessment on new business opportunities formed during the pandemic. Examples of these businesses include courier services, food delivery services, ICT services and digital marketing.

OBJECTIVE 4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- A. The Ministry of Trade and Industry should collaborate with the major private Sector Umbrella groups to develop business continuity strategies for a changing global environment.
- B. The Companies Registry, Office of Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs should develop a campaign to encourage formal registration of businesses in the Creative and other sectors with the potential to capitalise on overseas markets. The first phase of this

registration exercise should be completed by the end of fiscal 2021/2022.

C. The TTCSI should provide the Committee with an update on the Gateway to Trade programme

INTRODUCTION

Background: Covid-19 and unemployment: A brief review of international experiences

- 3.1.1. The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 8 is to, '*promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*'.¹ The 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has negatively impacted the unemployment sector worldwide.
- 3.1.2. The COVID-19 health crisis has turned into a global economic crisis, putting at risk the health, jobs and incomes of millions of people around the world. The strict containment measures adopted by many countries in the first half of 2020 to control the contagion has put a substantial brake on most economic and social activities.
- 3.1.3. The collapse in total hours worked and the decline in participation have not been seen in peacetime since the Great Depression. This precipitous reduction in economic activities has resulted in a global economic recession which was manifested by depressed economic conditions in many G20 economies. Considerable challenges include: devising a rapid and sustained recovery plan and rebuilding a more resilient and inclusive labour market.² Figure 1 highlights the impact of COVID -19 on meeting the targets under sustainable Goal 8.
- 3.1.4. As the coronavirus spread around the world and workplaces closed, millions of workers lost part or all of their incomes. Even if still working, many workers had to accept shorter hours and/or wage cuts in different industries such as airlines, retail and accommodation, food services and the textile and garment sectors. These are highly feminized sectors. Women have therefore been disproportionately affected by these closures. In some instances, wage cuts were negotiated in collective agreements between workers and employers.³

¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030-goal8.html>

² https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_756331.pdf

³ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_756331.pdf

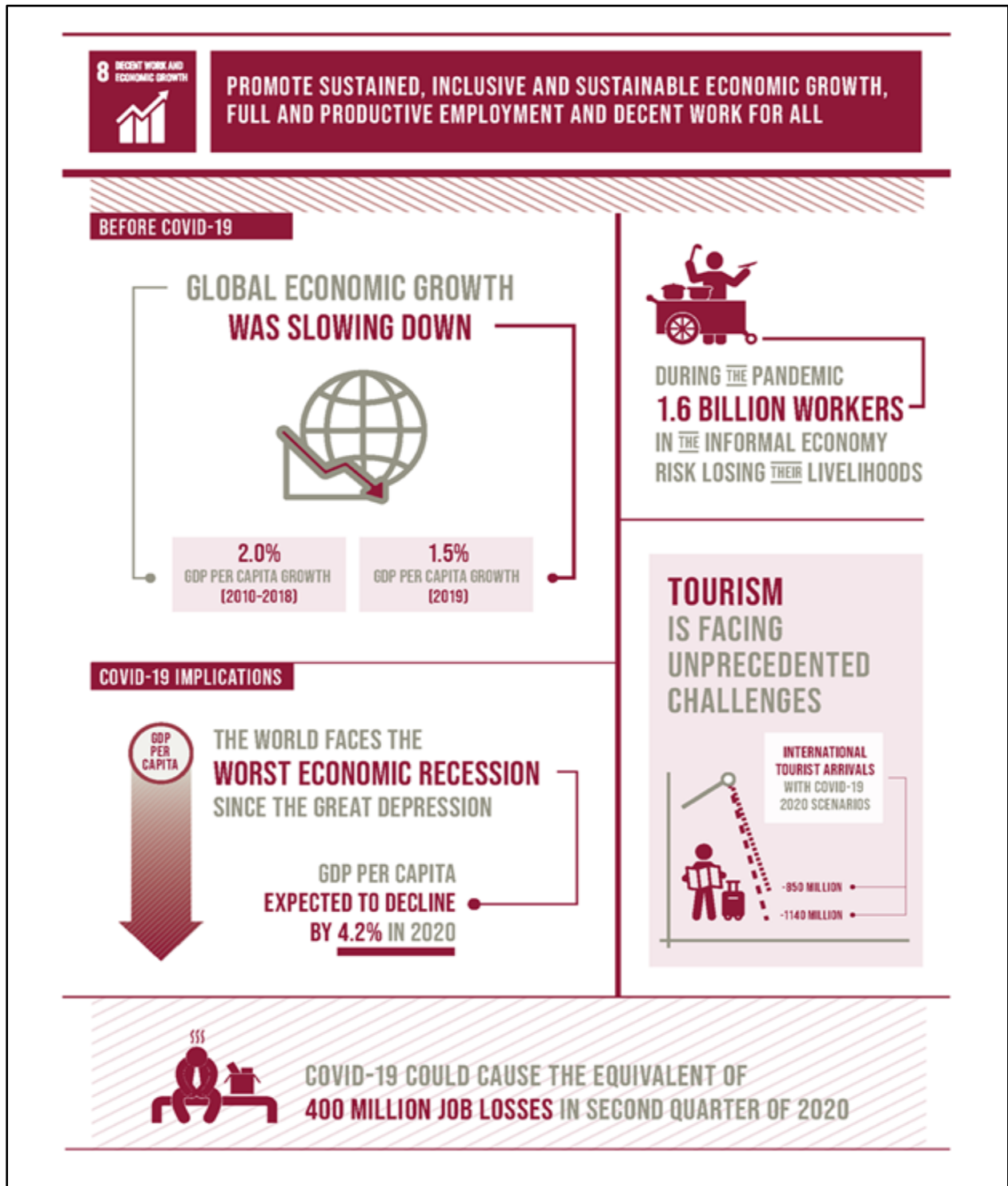


FIGURE 1 IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 8

- 3.1.5. The share of workers living in countries with COVID-19 -related restrictions has remained high, with 93 per cent of the world's workers residing in countries with some form of workplace closure measures in place in January 2021. ⁴Within countries, more geographically targeted and sector-specific measures have gradually become the norm over the course of the pandemic, and these were still affecting 77 per cent of workers at the start of 2021 (close to the peak of 85 per cent reached in late July 2020).⁵
- 3.1.6. For example, **in Argentina**, a collective agreement included a 25% cut in the wages of workers in shutdown sectors for 60 days as of April 1, 2020, with a view to saving jobs. Among workers who still had a paid job in early April 2020, 35% in the US, 30% in the **UK** and 20% in **Germany** reported lower earnings in March compared to earlier months.⁶
- 3.1.7. Various countries also implemented wage cuts in the public sector.⁷ In some countries, labour statistics point to falling wages. In Australia, nominal average wages of workers aged 50 to 59 years old declined by 3.2% between the week ending March 14, 2020 and the week ending June 13, 2020.⁸
- 3.1.8. In the UK, real average wages declined by 1.2% in April, after also declining in March 2020. In the U.S. by contrast, there was an unprecedented real wage jump of 5.8% in April 2020, followed by a smaller real growth of 0.5% in May 2020. However, this reflects a compositional effect of greater job loss among low-paid workers than high-paid workers which raises the average of the earnings of workers still in jobs. When restricting the analysis to workers employed in consecutive periods, one study finds that in March, April and May 2020, wage freezes and wage cuts were much more common than during the same months in 2019.⁹ In Canada, there was also an exceptional acceleration in real wage growth reflecting greater job loss for low-paid workers, rising by 6.8% in April 2020, following a substantial increase in unemployment from 8% in March, 2020 to 13.4% in April, 2020.

⁴https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_767028.pdf

⁵https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_767028.pdf

⁶ <https://sites.google.com/view/covidinequality/home>

⁷ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/no-mid-year-payout-for-all-civil-servants-this-year-public-service-division>

⁸ <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6160.0.55.001>

⁹ (Cajner, 2020[40]).

- 3.1.9. In the United States of America, the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had a significant impact on unemployment in every state, industry, and major demographic group. Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, young workers, women, workers with low educational attainment, part-time workers, and racial and ethnic minorities had relatively high unemployment rates in April. Many, but not all, of these groups had relatively high rates in December, 2020 as well.¹⁰
- 3.1.10. In the United Kingdom, the headline rate of unemployment for April-June 2020 was 3.9%—only slightly higher than the 3.89% rate in April-June 2019. In June 2020, 9.3 million people were in the coronavirus job retention scheme and another 2.7 million had claimed a self-employment income support scheme grant. Additionally, there had been the largest ever decrease in weekly hours worked with 650 000 fewer workers reported on payrolls in June, 2020 than in March, 2020. Furthermore, the benefit claimant count had more than doubled from 1.24 million to 2.63 million people.¹¹

Local Trends in Unemployment

- 3.1.11. In Trinidad and Tobago, during the period between March 2020, when the first case of COVID-19 was detected, and June 2020, some of the following immediate and short-term public health regulations and responses effects resulted in the following¹²:
- a. The loss of wages and income due to stay-at-home measures and the resultant challenge for some households to continue to meet basic needs;
 - b. Increased unemployment, retrenchment and termination of workers due to revenue loss and the closure of businesses;
 - c. Decreased working hours;
 - d. An increase in the number of persons in need of food support;
 - e. Restrictions on travel due to the closure of the country's borders;
 - f. Slowdown in productivity in sectors such as construction and manufacturing;
 - g. Reduction in local demand, sales and exports; and

¹⁰ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R46554.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m3687>

¹² <https://www.finance.gov.tt/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Social-Sector-Investment-Programme-2021-1.pdf> page 58.

h. Some sectors have been severely impacted including tourism, hospitality, manufacturing, trade, distribution, construction, personal and professional services, and the creative sector, entertainment and recreation.

3.1.12. The Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries (TTCSI) in collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association (TTMA) conducted a survey of its members to assess the impact of COVID-19 on businesses. The survey included 26 questions and was executed over the period April 20, 2020 to April 24, 2020. A total of 394 responses representing 394 businesses in Trinidad and Tobago were recorded. The survey highlighted the following¹³:

3.1.13. As a result of the country's COVID-19 mitigation measures:

- 36% of businesses have terminated full-time employees and 54% of businesses have terminated part-time or contractual employees;
- 57% of companies who did not terminate staff, furloughed employees;
- 67% have furloughed at least 25% of their workers comprising both full-time and part-time employees; and
- 46% of employers who did not terminate staff, resorted to a reduction in wages.

3.1.14. Out of the 49% of businesses deemed non-essential, 45% were closed throughout the period. On the other hand, 30% of companies reduced their hours of operation. Subsequently, 17% of businesses have maintained regular hours, whilst others experienced increased demand and worked longer hours.

3.1.15. 46% of respondents representing 180 firms, indicated a decrease in their average wages with more than 70% reducing their wages by more than 25%.

3.1.16. 34% of respondents indicated that their employees had indeed accessed government grants as at April 2020;

Additionally, in response to questions asked in the House of Representatives on November 09, 2020, the Minister of Labour highlighted that for the period March 21, 2020 to October 01, 2020, 98 retrenchment notices were submitted. These notices were in respect of 1,891 persons who were identified as retrenched.¹⁴

¹³ <https://www.ttcsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EIA2020-TTCSI-TTMA-Final-VG-May5-2020.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.ttparliament.org/hansards/hh20201109.pdf> page 27.

- 3.1.17. The 2020 National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago (NIBTT) Report on Operations highlighted that, during the year 2020, the number of employers registering NIBTT was; 1,752, which is a decrease of 298 or 14.54% when compared with the 2,050, registered in FY 2019. The active employer population also decreased marginally from 20,714 in FY2019 to 20,274 in FY2020, which is a decrease of 2.12% during the current reporting period. New registrants of employees for FY2020 were 13,700 employees, which is a decrease of 3,673 or 21%, compared to 17, 373 in FY 2019. ¹⁵
- 3.1.18. According to the Review of the Economy 2021, the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago reported that the number of job advertisements published in the print media during the first seven months of 2021 declined by 28.7%. Additionally, the latest available labour force data from the Central Statistical Office, for the third quarter of fiscal 2020, shows an increase in the unemployment rate to 5.1%, from 4.4% in the third quarter of 2019.¹⁶
- 3.1.19. Additionally, according to the latest data from the Ministry of Labour, 837 persons were retrenched, during the first nine months of 2021. Retrenchments were primarily in the wholesale and retail trade, restaurants and hotels (285 persons), petroleum and gas including production, refining and service contractors (209 persons), manufacturing (187 persons) and transport, storage and communication (85 persons).

Support provided by related state bodies to persons unemployed due to COVID-19

- 3.1.20. A breakdown of Government's safety net measures implemented **as at September 2021** to cushion the social and economic impacts due to COVID-19 restrictions is outlined in the tables below. An estimated total of 275,707 individuals have benefited from the support measures.¹⁷

¹⁵ NIBTT. Report on Operations for the financial year ended September 2020. Pages 5.

<http://parlcloud.ttparliament.org:8081/PapersLaidViewer/TempFiles/NIBTT%20-%20Report%20on%20Operations%20for%20financial%20year%20ended%20June%2030,%202020.pdf>

¹⁶ Review of the Economy 2021. Pages 87-88. <https://www.finance.gov.tt/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Review-of-the-Economy-2021.pdf>

¹⁷ Social sector Investment Programme 2022, pages 81-84 <https://www.finance.gov.tt/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Social-Sector-Investment-Programme-2022.pdf>

Table 1: COVID-19 Relief measures Phase 1

Ministry	COVID-19 Intervention	Description	Beneficiaries
Ministry of Finance-National Insurance Board	Salary Relief Grants	A grant available to persons who contributed to NIS and experienced retrenchment/termination/reduced income for an initial period not exceeding 3 months.	91,393
Ministry of Finance	Salary Relief Grants	A COVID-19 Relief measure to assist persons whose employment or income was suspended or terminated as a result of the public health restrictions implemented in May 2021. Persons whose income was suspended/terminated at the beginning of May 2021, will receive \$1,500 for the month of May and \$1,500 for the month of June. Persons whose income was suspended/terminated from May 8th, 2021 will receive \$1,000 for the month of May and \$1,500 for the month of June. ¹⁸	4,070
NEDCO	Entrepreneurship Relief Grant	A Grant Facility to assist micro and small enterprises earning less than one million dollars (\$1,000,000.00), to recover from the effects of COVID-19	416

¹⁸ <https://www.finance.gov.tt/2021/05/19/covid-19-salary-relief-grant-2021/>

Ministry	COVID-19 Intervention	Description	Beneficiaries
Ministry of Community Development Culture & the Arts	One Off Emergency Relief Grant	A one-off Emergency Relief Grant in the sum of \$5,000.00 to artists and creatives, who have lost income due to cancelled exhibitions, classes, conferences, workshops and other cultural related events	1,055
Ministry of Works and Transport	Maxi - Taxi Owners Fuel Relief Grant (Diesel Grant)	The Maxi - Taxi Owners Fuel Relief Grant was provided to mitigate the economic impacts on Taxi Owners. This was due to the measures implemented by the Government for maxi-taxi drivers to operate at half capacity when plying their trade. The Ministry of Works and Transport in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance issued a one-time payment valued at \$2,000 as a Relief Grant to qualified, registered owners of operational H-Taxis only.	1973
Ministry of Social Development and Family Services	Food Support	Additional support to existing beneficiaries of food support;	25,101
		Food and Income Support-Retrenched/Terminated/Income Reduced	54,724
		The provision of Food Support to households that receive meals from the School Feeding Programme but who are not current beneficiaries of food support	20,497

COVID-19 Intervention	Description	Beneficiaries
Income Support	Support to current beneficiaries of the Public Assistance and Disability Assistance Grant	42,451
Senior Citizens Pension (outstanding)	Food support to persons who applied for Senior Citizens Pension but their applications were pending.	2,818
Disability Assistance Grant (outstanding)	Food Support to persons who applied for Disability Assistance Grant but their matters were pending	488
Hampers	Emergency Hampers were provided to families in urgent need during the stay at home period. This project was executed in collaboration with the 14 Municipal Corporations.	1,400
Food Vouchers	Food Vouchers/Market Boxes provided to families, in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture during the stay at home period and continuing. This included a basket of fresh produce, inclusive of two chickens, and a grocery voucher.	24,999
Rental Assistance	Rental Assistance to a family where a member was retrenched/terminated/reduced	4,322

Table 2: COVID-19 Relief Phase 2

Ministry	COVID-19 Intervention	Description	Allocated Budget
Ministry of Finance -National Insurance Board	Credit Union COVID-19 Emergency Loan	The Credit Union COVID-19 Emergency Loan is government-financed and is intended to provide funds to members to mitigate any losses incurred because of the pandemic.	100 Million
	SME Stimulus Loan Facility	The SME Stimulus Loan Facility is a government-sponsored loan programme to help micro, small and medium-sized businesses impacted by the pandemic. Loans will be facilitated via participating Commercial Banks.	230 Million
	Salary Relief Grants	A grant available to persons who contributed to NIS and experienced retrenchment/termination/reduced income for an initial period not exceeding 3 months.	30 Million
Ministry of Social Development and Family Services	Income Support Grant	A grant available to persons who were not in the NIS system and experienced retrenchment/ termination/income reduced.	
	Food card	This initiative involved the provision of 50 food cards for each member of Parliament for distribution to their most vulnerable constituents.	20 Million

	COVID-19 Intervention	Description	Allocated Budget
	Collaboration with Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs)	The government collaborated with FBOs to provide much food support to vulnerable members of society.	10 Million
Ministry of Youth Development and National Service NEDCO	Entrepreneurship Relief Grant	A Grant Facility to assist micro and small enterprises earning less than one million dollars (\$1,000,000.00), to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic	20 Million
Ministry of Agriculture Land and Fisheries & NAMDEVCO	Food Baskets	Market Boxes which were provided to families included a basket of fresh produce, two chickens, and a grocery voucher. The initiative aims to support 25,000 families across all 41 constituencies. ¹⁹	30 Million

3.1.21. During a press conference held by the Minister of Finance on May 20, 2021, and in response to Questions on Notice asked in the House of Representatives on November 09, 2020, the following information was provided with respect to Covid-19 support grants:^{20 21}

Salary Relief Grants

3.1.22. From the initial disbursement on **April 27, 2020 to September the 25, 2020**, a total of 81,100 salary relief grants were disbursed to 33,734 persons at a value of \$129,471,862. The breakdown can be seen in the Table below.

Tranche	Number of grants paid	Value of payments
1st	29,945	\$42,631,660
2nd	25,509	\$38,043,576
3rd	21,857	32,769,200
Single payments in all 3 tranches	3,789	\$16,027,426
Total	81,100	129,471,862

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/NAMDEVCO/photos/a.1575895372738035/2954631181531107/>

²⁰ <http://www.ttparliament.org/hansards/hh20201109.pdf> page 9, 25, 28.

²¹ <https://www.finance.gov.tt/2021/06/15/covid-19-relief-measures-2021/>

- 3.1.23. As at **April, 30, 2021**, a total of 85,447 salary relief grants of \$1,500 were disbursed at a value of \$140 Million. Additionally, there were 7,000 persons who are eligible for the grant but did not have valid bank accounts and will be paid via debit cards.
- 3.1.24. As at September 01, 2021, there were 48,332 recipients of the Salary Relief Grant at a total value of \$179, 287, 970.00.
- 3.1.25. The Minister of Finance also highlighted that a salary relief grant will be provided to eligible persons, who do not contribute to the NIS, whose income was suspended/terminated at the beginning of May 2021. Persons whose income was suspended/terminated from May 08, 2021 were expected to receive \$1,000 for the month of May and \$1,500 for the month of June²².
- 3.1.26. Additionally, at the close of the application period, in July 2021, the MOF received 24,000 applications. The screening of applications to determine eligibility is currently underway and as at August 16, 2021, the MOF has screened 14,747 applications and disbursed payments to 4,070 individuals.

Entrepreneurial Relief Grant Programme

- 3.1.27. As at **September 21, 2020**:

the total number of grants issued was **425**;

the total monetary value of the grants issued was **\$3,925,000**; and

the total number of individuals or small and micro enterprises that applied for these grants was **4,087**.

- 3.1.28. As at **April 30, 2021**, NEDCO indicated:

○ the total number of grants issued was **1,800**; and

○ the total monetary value of the grants issued was **\$16 Million**.

- 3.1.29. The Ministry of Finance (MoF) will collaborate with NEDCO to encourage micro entrepreneurs to access the grants and accelerate the roll out of the grant.

²² <https://www.finance.gov.tt/2021/05/19/covid-19-salary-relief-grant-2021/>

Small and Medium Enterprises Stimulus Loan Programme

3.1.30. As of **September 21, 2020**, the total number of businesses or individuals who had applied for the government-guaranteed COVID-19 relief soft loan programme was **327. 137 business entities**, partnerships and limited liability companies and five (5) individuals, sole traders had received loans. The total lent under this programme as at September 21, 2020, was \$21,175,000.

3.1.31. The Minister of Finance indicated that the loan has not been fully utilised and over \$229 Million remains from the amount allocated to the programme, as such, the MoF collaborate with the banks to adjust the programme to make it easier for small businesses to access the loans.

Rental Assistance, Income Support, Food Support

3.1.32. As at **September 25, 2020**, the number of rental assistance, income support and food support grants distributed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were as follows:

- Rental assistance: **number of beneficiaries, 3,770**; expenditure, \$16,317,810;
- Income support: **47,330 beneficiaries**; expenditure, \$144,402,750; and
- Food support: the number of **beneficiaries, 48,922**; expenditure, \$74,850,660.

3.1.33. As at **April 30, 2021**, the number of rental assistance, income support and food support grants distributed by the MSDFS was reported as follows:

Support	Beneficiaries (approx.)	Expenditure (approx.)
Food Support provided to existing beneficiaries	25, 000	\$17.1 Million
Food and Income Support to retrenched persons or persons whose income were reduced	51,493	\$221.3 Million
Food support to persons who received school feeding programme	20,497	\$31.3 Million
Support to persons on disability assistance or applied for senior citizens pensions but had not yet received their pension	3,000	\$14 Million
Support to current beneficiaries of disability and public assistance grants	42,451	\$22.5 Million

Support	Beneficiaries (approx.)	Expenditure (approx.)
Rental Assistance to persons with reduced income or who were retrenched	4,322	\$22 Million.
Emergency hampers provided to persons in urgent need	1, 100	\$7 Million
Food vouchers and market boxes	25,000	
200 religious bodies to provide food support to the needy	50,000	\$30 Million
Total	222,863	\$365.2 Million

Reemployment Response

- 3.1.34. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), to promote an inclusive, job-rich recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, countries need a bold and innovative employment-focused policy agenda. In this context, gender-responsive national employment policies can play an important role but will need to be adapted in terms of both existing policy frameworks and the formulation of new recovery strategies. The type of adaptation also depends critically on the situation in the country (e.g. current policy frameworks, fiscal space, institutional capacity, etc.). In light of the evolving and complex nature of the crisis, three key policy dimensions can be identified:²³
- 3.1.35. Due to the heightened uncertainty, policymakers will need to adapt their employment policy approach by: strengthening data collection, assessments and analytical approaches; following more agile public policy processes; and engaging in regular social dialogue with employer and worker organizations.
- 3.1.36. Drawing on the latest data and analysis, along with social dialogue, employment policy measures need to be sequenced and revised in line with the evolution of the crisis across a number of areas, including: **macroeconomic policies; sectoral strategies and business support; social protection and income support; employment services, active labour market policies (ALMPs) and labour market institutions; and skills development.**

²³ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_756676.pdf

3.1.37. Specific measures targeting hard-hit sectors and groups (e.g. women and young people), especially for those in the informal economy, are required during the reactivation and recovery phases, along with identifying opportunities in new sectors with employment potential, which can benefit these groups.

Preliminary Economic Recovery plans

3.1.38. Objective two of the ‘Report of the Roadmap to Recovery Committee’²⁴ aims to ‘Retain and Create Jobs’. The report stated that the economy necessitates deliberate attention to safeguarding employment and creating new opportunities for individual income earners. In the medium-term, this objective must extend beyond salaried opportunities and must be anchored in the nurturing of an integrated ecosystem with a strong affinity to innovation and entrepreneurship. The strategies are to:

1. Focus on settlement of outstanding liabilities to key sectors infusing working capital and liquidity support for further employment generation and economic activity;
2. Begin the dialogue of reengineering the workplace by integrating revised protocols for protecting public health and unlocking the lessons learnt from the current working arrangements and best practice;
3. Set the stage for the retooling of the national workforce through upskilling and building technological expertise that would allow for greater productivity, performance and first-class service; and
4. Revamp the Innovation and Entrepreneurship ecosystem unlocking youth and other entrepreneurship clusters aligned to accelerate our national recovery platform.

3.1.39. In order to achieve objectives two to four of the ‘Report of the Roadmap to Recovery Committee’– Retain and Create Jobs; Boost Aggregate Demand; Minimise and Remediate Supply Disruptions, the **following initiatives were recommended**²⁵:

- i. Adopting workplace protocols for the safe return to work;
- ii. Increasing spending in the construction sector;
- iii. Providing appropriate relief to business enterprises particularly Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs);

²⁴https://planning.gov.tt/sites/default/files/Report%20of%20the%20Roadmap%20to%20Recovery%20Committee_1st_.pdf page 29.

²⁵https://planning.gov.tt/sites/default/files/Report%20of%20the%20Roadmap%20to%20Recovery%20Committee_1st_.pdf pages 53-69.

- iv. Sustaining economic activity in energy and energy related industries;
- v. Providing appropriate financial relief through banking and insurance institutions and credit union;
- vi. Stimulating economic activity in Tobago- supporting the resurgence of Tobago businesses, expanding agricultural activity, boosting local tourism;
- vii. Initiatives in the areas of; ease of doing business, building institutional capacity, critical supporting infrastructure and national value system;
- viii. Creating an environment of harmony and inclusiveness -The overarching strategy of the Committee is to create a platform for national dialogue to engender change in the national identity of the Trinbagonian toward one of i) physical, psychological and emotional safety, ii) collaboration in nation building, iii) delivery of fairness and equity, iv) generosity to be our sister's/brother's keeper, and v) productivity to achieve in all spheres of the society.

Conduct of the Inquiry

3.1.40. Prior to the commencement of the public hearings, the Committee issued invitations to specific stakeholders and requested written submissions based on the following objectives:

- 1. To examine the trends in unemployment and job losses in the private and public sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic;**
- 2. To assess the unemployment relief strategies and programmes of the State during the COVID-19 pandemic;**
- 3. To examine the proposed strategies of the State to stimulate job creation and employment opportunities to counteract the adverse economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic;**
- 4. To examine the changes in the operations of the private sector to sustain business during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

3.1.41. Evidence gathering for this inquiry included two (2) public hearings held with the following governmental and non-government stakeholders on November 17, 2021 and December 8, 2021.

Wednesday, November 17, 2021

- Ministry of Finance
- Ministry of Labour
- Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
- Tobago House of Assembly: Division of Community Development and Enterprise Development

Wednesday December 8, 2021

- Ministry of Labour
- Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association
- Banking Insurance and General Workers Union
- Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries
- Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union
- Amalgamated Workers Union

3.1.42. Subsequent to these public hearings, additional information was requested from specific stakeholders and was submitted accordingly.

3.1.43. Oral and written submissions received from the entities appearing before the Committee provided a frame of reference for the Committee's deliberations on the subject inquiry.

3.1.44. The **Minutes of the Meetings** during which the public hearings were held are attached as **Appendix II and Appendix III** and the **Verbatim Notes** as **Appendix IV and Appendix V**.

KEY ISSUES, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OBJECTIVE 1: To examine the trends in unemployment and job losses in the private and public sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Situational Analysis and Statistics Provided by Government Entities

4.1.1. Based on information gathered from the Central Statistical Office, the **Ministry of Labour** indicated that there was a net reduction of 11,700 in the number of people with jobs in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the corresponding period in 2019. The Ministry provided the following key observations for that period:

- a) There were job gains for approximately 60,000-70,000 people;
- b) The major job gains were experienced in the Agriculture sector (increase of 8,800 workers), the Petroleum sector (increase of 4,300 workers) and the Financing and Insurance sector (increase of 5,000 workers).
- c) The sectors most affected by job losses are as follows
 - Manufacturing (reduction of 16,700 workers or 37.7%)
 - Construction (reduction of 12,100 workers or 15.9%)
 - Community and Personnel Services (reduction of 4,700 workers or 2.2%)
 - Wholesale and Retail (reduction of 10,600 workers or 10.1%)

4.1.2. The **Division of Community Development and Enterprise Development of the THA** has not been able to capture data on under-employment in Tobago. However, the Division reported that the sectors most affected by unemployment in Tobago due to the Covid-19 pandemic are the hospitality sector and the construction sector.

Situational Analysis and Data Provided by the Business Community and Trade Unions

4.1.3. Preliminary data from the **Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Service Industries (TTCSI)** indicated that the tourism sector, sport services, personal care services, and day care services

were among the sectors most adversely affected by the pandemic, as these sectors were yet to reopen.

- 4.1.4. TTCSI also indicated that the business and professional services sector (i.e. consultants, IT professionals, architects) had flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic as these sectors were able to pivot and adapt with the aid of technology.
- 4.1.5. **Caribbean Airlines Limited (CAL)** did not institute a rotational approach to the employment situation. Instead, employees on active duty received a 5% to 10% salary reduction while persons not on active duty received a 100% salary reduction.
- 4.1.6. The Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union indicated that, as at December 15, 2021, all persons laid off would be back out to work.
- 4.1.7. According to the **Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association**, the manufacturing sector was not significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and was still expected to double the manufacturing output by 2025.

The **Amalgamated Workers Union** reported that the fast food sector was significantly affected by the State's Covid-19 response measures especially because this sector was not classified as essential.

Labour Disputes and other Industrial Relations matters

- 4.1.8. The Industrial Court indicated that as of October 22, 2021, there were 191 Industrial Relations Offences filed, with 189 having been heard at the Case level and that were due to be heard on October 26, 2021.
- 4.1.9. The submission from the Industrial Court also indicated that as of October 25, 2021 85 Industrial Relations Offences were disposed while 100 were still active.
- 4.1.10. All of the Industrial Relations Offences referred to in the submission were complaints which arose as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Issues included were related to retrenchment, reduction of working hours, new company policies, temporary lay-offs and unilateral alteration of the terms and conditions of employment.
- 4.1.11. The Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy Division of the Ministry of Labour has been active in providing information to the public about rights and responsibilities of employers and employees.

- 4.1.12. The current Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act contains provisions for reporting retrenchment of 5 or more employments to the Ministry of Labour. However, during the pandemic, the Ministry issued a public advisory that regardless of size, all retrenchments should be reported to the Ministry.
- 4.1.13. The Ministry of Labour utilised digital platforms to engage the public with regard to the process of lodging industrial relations complaints.
- 4.1.14. Between 100 to 300 unvaccinated workers within the financial sectors received warning letters.
- 4.1.15. There were less than 10 industrial relations matters against employers received by the **Banking Insurance and General Workers Union (BIGWU)** that were referred to the Industrial Court.
- 4.1.16. The AWTU has also endeavoured to settle its industrial relations matters outside of the court and there are still some outstanding matters to be settled.

Findings

Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- i. There was a direct correlation between the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago and the rise in unemployment;
- ii. The unofficial unemployment trends indicate a need for greater focus on business continuity planning and buffers to maintain businesses during challenging times;
- iii. Given that there were sectors that experienced job gains, this indicates the need for greater economic diversification; this will allow for swift pivoting during economically challenging times and maximisation for continued growth in these sectors;
- iv. The sectors that experienced job gains were mostly technology-based and knowledge-based sectors;
- v. Gains in the Agricultural sector indicate potential growth for that sector;
- vi. Though the Ministry of Labour indicated that the Manufacturing sector was one of the sectors most affected by unemployment, according to the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association, that sector was not significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- vii. Industrial Relations disputes arising from issues related directly to the Covid-19 pandemic workplace protocols and arrangements (such as vaccination requirements) indicate a need for re-

assessing legislation relevant to employer/employee relations.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. The Ministry of Labour should conduct a comprehensive assessment of Business Continuity Plans formulated and employed by State Enterprise, Statutory Bodies and other public sector entities with a view to collating and publishing the successful strategies which were applied and the key lessons learned. Efforts should be made to complete this exercise by the last quarter of 2022.
- B. The Ministry of Labour, The Ministry of Trade and Industry and The Ministry of Planning and Development (CSO) should collaborate to conduct an analysis of job gains made during the Covid-19 pandemic to complement previous research done on economic diversification in Trinidad and Tobago.
- C. The Ministry of Digital Transformation should conduct an assessment of the sectors that experienced employment gains and determine how the use of technology influenced employment retention. This knowledge can then be used to develop technology-based solutions to employment retention in other sectors. Gaps in technology should also be ventilated in terms of hardware, connectivity and software solutions.
- D. The Ministry of Labour and the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association should compare data on job losses in the Manufacturing Sector to develop a more accurate assessment of job losses in that sector. This comparative analysis should be executed before the end of 2nd quarter of 2022.

OBJECTIVE 2: To assess the unemployment relief strategies and programmes of the State during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Support Provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services

- 5.1.1. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services provided the following types of assistance:
 - Income Support

- Food Support
 - Rental Grant
- 5.1.2. In Phase I of its relief efforts, the MSDF approved **59,716 Income Support applications and rejected 4,940**
- 5.1.3. **In Phase II, 1,271 applications were approved while 5,472 were rejected**
- 5.1.4. The majority of applicants were in the 31-45 age group
- 5.1.5. The MSDF reported that the majority of applicants were employed in construction, retail, roadside vending and restaurant services.
- 5.1.6. Some of the major reasons for applications being rejected were as follows:
- a. applicants with NIS numbers were ineligible and therefore referred to the Ministry of Finance;
 - b. effective date of retrenchment was earlier than March 2020;
 - c. applicants were accessing funds from multiple sources;
 - d. incomplete applications; and
 - e. applicants were non-nationals with no official status.
- 5.1.7. In Phase I, 61% of applicants were male, 35% of applicants were female and 4% did not specify their gender.
- 5.1.8. In Phase II, 45% of applicants were female and 51% of applicants were male

Support Provided by the Ministry of Finance

- 5.1.9. The Ministry of Finance was responsible for the Salary Relief Grant. Eligibility Requirements for this grant included:
- a. Date unemployment took place during the pandemic;
 - b. Applicant should not be a recipient of any other grants; and
 - c. Applicant must be a national of Trinidad and Tobago and provide a National ID Card.
- 5.1.10. NEDCO was responsible for administrating the **Entrepreneurial Relief Grant**. Submission requirements for this grant included:
- Certificate of Registration
 - Proof of Address
 - Financial Records
 - Invoices for the eligible period to support loss claims
 - Receipts
- 5.1.11. **7,045 Salary Relief Grant applicants were unsuccessful.** One major reason given for these applications being denied was that the period of unemployment fell outside of the required period.

5.1.12. The Criteria for funding from the Ministry of Finance were:

- Date of unemployment between April 28 and May 31;
- National of Trinidad and Tobago;
- Not in receipt of any other grant funding.

5.1.13. NEDCO provided skills training and mentorship for 2,500 people.

5.1.14. The Ministry of Finance reported that it operated a help line for applicants to call to follow-up on their applications

Support Provided by the Tobago House of Assembly

5.1.15. The Department of Community Development has provided skills re-training for individuals affected by unemployment due to the pandemic.

5.1.16. The Department of Labour has partnered with the Ministry of Labour to assist retrenched individuals with the job search process.

5.1.17. The Division assisted affected businesses and disbursed **approximately 293 Covid business grants, 28 tourism grants, 6 Covid loans and 30 non-Covid grants.**

5.1.18. Tourism grants were given to businesses within the tourism industry and amounted to a **total disbursement of \$1,088,645.57**

5.1.19. Individual applicants were referred to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Challenges Experienced in the disbursement of State-funded relief

5.1.20. The major challenge experienced in Phase I of the Salary Relief Grant was that the application process was entirely manual. As such, there was a long processing time.

5.1.21. For Phase II, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services utilised a completely online application system, which reduced the processing time.

5.1.22. NEDCO also reported that processing time was slowed down due to technical issues.

5.1.23. There were several applications that did not meet the eligibility criteria.

5.1.24. Some of the reasons applications were denied included:

- Duplicate applications
- Applications from non-nationals
- Incomplete applications
- Applicants accessed relief funds from other Government services

5.1.25. At the time of the Public Hearing, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services indicated that it intended to complete the process of distributing outstanding cheques by the

end of November, 2021 and distributing funds via debit cards by the beginning of December 2021.

- 5.1.26. The MSDFS was overwhelmed by the volume of applications and therefore received assistance of external validators
- 5.1.27. The National Insurance Board and First Citizens Bank assisted with printing cheques
- 5.1.28. Cheques were distributed via TTPost. However, not all cheques were delivered as the addresses provided were no longer valid
- 5.1.29. The MSDF placed announcements in the major local newspapers regarding cheques that were undelivered. Of the 576 cheques in question, 265 applicants responded to the announcement and were able to have their cheques re-printed.
- 5.1.30. Banks have returned funds distributed through the Automatic Clearing House (ACH) system due to accounts listed by applicants being closed.
- 5.1.31. The Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association (TTMA) identified the following issues with the grant distribution for pandemic:
- the need for a social safety net i.e. an NIS unemployment relief programme;
 - the need for a review of the National Insurance System in Trinidad and Tobago;
 - the need to create a programme that allows the business community and the labour force to interface and collectively provide meaningful contributions to the system
- 5.1.32. The Amalgamated Workers Union indicated that there were persons who applied for grants, were approved but have not yet received the grant payment.
- 5.1.33. The Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union (ACAWU) coordinated with umbrella trade union bodies to lobby with Ministries distributing the grants to assist the members who have not yet received their grants.
- 5.1.34. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) advised the ACAWU that the grants were approved but that at the time of the Public Hearing, the Ministry is awaiting funds to disburse the grants.
- 5.1.35. Some of the challenges encountered by business owners in accessing grants provided by the State were due to their inability to meet the eligibility criteria;
- 5.1.36. The salary relief grants were available to selected sectors, as such, employees of sectors deemed essential, who were laid-off during the grant period of May/June, were not eligible to receive the grant;

- 5.1.37. There was ambiguity when applying for the grant. Applicants whose last salary was on April 29, 2021 and become unemployed as at May 01, 2021 were not eligible to receive the grant.
- 5.1.38. According to information received from the TTCSEI, all grants applied for by their membership in 2020 were received, however, in 2021 only 10% of the grants applied for were received.
- 5.1.39. As at December 08, 2021, no members of the ACAWU who applied for the Income Support Grant had received the payment.

Findings

- 5.1.40. Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:
- i. The State was able to provide multiple channels of support for persons who were adversely affected by the pandemic due to unemployment, underemployment and displacement;
 - ii. There needs to be greater coordination among State agencies that provide social support in order to reduce ambiguity and ineffective communication with clients;
 - iii. The initial challenges with manual systems causing delays in processing grant applications underscore the importance of digital transformation across the Public Service;
 - iv. While there were complaints from the Private Sector concerning employees not being able to access support, the State was not entirely at fault as some of the challenges related to employers not paying the required statutory payments for their employees; a lack of compliance was identified.
 - v. The high number of applications that were rejected due to errors and/or eligibility issues suggests a need for clearer communication with the public when disseminating information on application criteria and processes for accessing support.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and the Ministry of Finance should collaborate with the Ministry of Digital Transformation to improve their application processes. During an inquiry into Work from Home arrangements in the**

public service during the pandemic, the Committee became aware of the project works to be executed to effect digitization and digitalization in the public service 2022. We recommend that the digitalisation of manual application process will be prioritised among these projects.

- B. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services should conduct an assessment of the effectiveness of its communication and feedback strategies inclusive of public views in order to improve its information dissemination systems and processes. Efforts should be made to complete this assessment by the end of the 2nd quarter of 2022.
- C. As part of its Ministerial Response to this Report, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services should provide the Committee with an update on outstanding payments owed to eligible citizens who applied for assistance and status of communication with clients.

OBJECTIVE 3: To examine the proposed strategies of the State to stimulate job creation and employment opportunities to counteract the adverse economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Job Creation Strategies: Tobago House of Assembly

- 6.1.1. In their written submission, the **Tobago House of Assembly, Division of Community Development and Enterprise Development** outlined the following job creation initiatives:
- Virtual Vocational Skills Training;
 - Virtual Occupational Safety and Health Training;
 - Virtual Customer Service Training;
 - Virtual Industrial Relations Training;
 - Virtual Manpower Development Advertising;
 - Y-Zone classes done virtually for Youth between 7 and 18 years old in areas such as photography, videography and music.
- 6.1.2. The Division of Community Development and Enterprise Development has increased its reach towards entrepreneurship to participants through the Vocational Skills training

Opportunities for Employment, Training and Skills Development: Ministry of Labour

- 6.1.3. The Ministry of Labour, in its written submission indicated that though there were challenges in placing NES applicants, there was some collaboration among the public sector, private sector and training institutions to facilitate and enhance employment options.
- 6.1.4. The NES also facilitated the employment of 490 citizens in the Commonwealth Caribbean Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Programme (CCSAWP) in 2020 and 499 citizens in 2021. However, due to the pandemic, this figure represents a decline in the average pre-pandemic figure of 700-800 Citizens per annum.
- 6.1.5. In 2020, the MOL, through the NES, collaborated with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) for the COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery Programme, which enabled unemployed citizens to have free and unlimited access to over 4,000 courses and 400 specialisations of Coursera, as a means to develop skills that are required to re-enter the labour market.
- 6.1.6. In 2021, the **Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme (YTEPP) Limited**, invited the Ministry of Labour to collaborate on the implementation of the Trinidad and Tobago Workforce Recovery and Development Programme, which is an extension of the COL-Coursera programme. The MOL is currently in discussion with YTEPP Limited in the development of a Memorandum of Understanding for this initiative.
- 6.1.7. The Ministry of Labour has not undertaken any formal assessments to date on the work environment as it relates to university graduates during the pandemic and their ability to secure employment of future studies and research. There is a need for an assessment of the effectiveness of government alignment of investments in education, training and growth sectors.
- 6.1.8. While the OJT Programme was initially affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, this challenge was overcome by the transition of training providers to working online, rotation systems and fewer office engagements. There is a need more effective software solutions to merge performance and productivity.
- 6.1.9. The MOL has been engaging Private Sector organisations to ensure that greater opportunities will be provided for the engagement of young persons in the post pandemic period.

6.1.10. As of June 2021, there were 35 new applications as Training Providers from small businesses and major companies in sectors such as insurance, manufacturing, oil and gas and Non-Governmental Organisations.

Findings

6.1.11. Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- i. During the Covid 19 pandemic the State's focus was more on providing unemployment relief than on strategies for stimulating job creation and employment opportunities.
- ii. There has not yet been a comprehensive review of the impact of state-sponsored training programmes on job creation and employment opportunities.
- iii. The lack of formal assessments on the impact of university graduates' ability to find employment during the pandemic needs to be addressed.
- iv. The partnership with the Private Sector in matching job seekers with job opportunities is necessary and needs to be assessed for the impact on stimulating job creation and creation of employment opportunities.
- v. The Ministry of Public Administration paid limited attention to HR practices and HR performance management systems in the Public Service.
- vi. While Government entities provided information on training and skills development programmes executed during the pandemic, details about timeframe, level of participation and facilitators for these training interventions were lacking.
- vii. There is a need for an assessment to be done on the impact of entrepreneurial development programmes on the creation of viable business opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. The Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Planning and Development should collaborate on conducting an assessment on the rate of job creation during the Covid-19 pandemic; this study should be commenced in the current fiscal year (2021/2022).**
- B. The Ministry of Labour should conduct an evaluation on the impact of state-sponsored training programmes on employment opportunities for trainees during the Covid-19 pandemic; this may entail selecting a sample of participants and tracking their experience interfacing with the job market during the pandemic.**
- C. The Ministry of Labour should conduct a targeted survey on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on employment and employability of university graduates who graduated during the period 2020-2022.**
- D. The Ministry of Labour should conduct an assessment on new business opportunities formed during the pandemic. Examples of these businesses include courier services, food delivery services, ICT services and digital marketing.**

OBJECTIVE 4: To examine the changes in the operations of the private sector to sustain business during the COVID-19 pandemic

Initiatives by the Banking Insurance and General Workers Union (BIGWU)

- 7.1.1. BIGWU and the Joint Trade Union Movement (JTUM) completed a paper highlighting the pros and cons of work-from-home.
- 7.1.2. BIGWU also conducted a risk assessment with the Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) to present to the financial institutions.
- 7.1.3. BIGWU, together with JTUM held a meeting with the Chambers of Commerce to discuss their position re: the COVID-19 pandemic situation and make recommendations to get business sectors reopened.
- 7.1.4. BIGWU interfaced with the employers on behalf of employees to reduce the rate of retrenchment.

Initiatives by the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Service Industries

- 7.1.5. The Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Service Industries indicated that their collaboration with the Ministry of Trade and Industry assisted persons who were non-compliant to become compliant in order to access the grant.
- 7.1.6. The TTCSI has also attempted to lobby the government and the Ministry of Health to allow all closed sectors to return to work.
- 7.1.7. The cultural and creative industries have sought the assistance of the TTCSI to increase their compliance and register their businesses during the pandemic.
- 7.1.8. The tourism sector has begun the creation and implementation of a comprehensive 'staycation' campaign to be refined in time for the reopening of the sector.
- 7.1.9. **TTCSI indicated that it would assist 80 firms**, in the first instance, within the business and professional services sector with the ability to win new markets. This will be facilitated through their Gateway to Trade programme, with a **nine (9) month training programme** focusing on marketing, website development, export and market connections.

Findings

7.1.10. Based on the preceding evidence, the Committee's findings are as follows:

- i. The ability of private sector entities to pivot operations to sustain business during the Covid-19 pandemic was highly dependent on the Public Health Regulations. There was therefore very limited room for non-essential services to adapt their business models.
- ii. The industries that were able to adapt more readily were those that catered to overseas markets and were more technologically equipped.
- iii. There is a need for greater adaptability and business continuity/change management strategies within the private sector to adapt to the changing global environment.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, the Committee recommends the following:

- A. The Ministry of Trade and Industry should collaborate with the major private Sector Umbrella groups to develop business continuity strategies for a changing global environment and to provide buffers to global economic volatility.**
- B. The Companies Registry, Office of Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs should develop a campaign to encourage formal registration of businesses in the Creative and other sectors with the potential to capitalise on overseas markets. The first phase of this registration exercise should be completed by the end of fiscal 2021/2022.**
- C. The TTCSI should provide the Committee with an update on the Gateway to Trade programme**

Your Committee respectfully submits this Report for the consideration of the Parliament.

Mr. Paul Richards
Chairman

Mr. Esmond Forde, MP
Vice-Chairman

Mr. Avinash Singh, MP
Member

Mr. David Nakhid
Member

Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP
Member

Mr. Roger Munroe, MP
Member

Mrs. Penelope Beckles, MP
Member

Mr. Rohan Sinanan, MP
Member

April 7, 2022

APPENDICES

Appendix I – List of officials who appeared and provided oral evidence

Name of Official	Portfolio	Organization
Public Hearing Held on November 17, 2021		
Ms. Yvonne Neemacharan	Deputy Permanent Secretary	Ministry of Finance
Mr. Anthony Joseph	Manager, Economic Management Division	
Mr. Calvin Maurice	Chief Executive Officer, NEDCO	
Ms. Natalie Willis	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)	Ministry of Labour
Ms. Sangeeta Boondoo	Senior Legal Officer	
Ms. Joann David	Director, On-the-Job Training Division	
Mr. Bruce Spencer	Head, Labour Market Information Unit	
Ms. Jacqueline Johnson	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)	Ministry of Social Development and Family Services
Mr. Michael Reid	Chief Technical Officer	
Mr. Seon Raymond	Director, Social Investigations Division	
Mr. Brennan Gowrie	Director, Monitoring and Evaluation	
Mr. Elon Mayo	Director of Labour	Tobago House of Assembly: Division of Community Development and Enterprise Development
Public Hearing Held on December 08, 2021		
Ms. Natalie Willis	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)	Ministry of Labour
Ms. Sengeeta Boondoo	Senior Legal Officer	

Ms. Sabina Gomez	Chief Labour Relations Officer	
Mr. Bruce Spencer	Head, Labour Market Information Unit	
Mr. George Naime Mr. Dale Parson	Director Director	Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association
Mr. Trevor Johnson Mr. Jason Brown	General Secretary 2nd Vice President	Banking Insurance and General Workers Union
Mr. Mark Edghill Ms. Vashti G. Guyadeen	President Chief Executive Officer	Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries
Mr. Peter Farmer	Secretary General	Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union
Amalgamated Workers Union	Michael Prentice	President General

Appendix II – Minutes of 7th Meeting

**EXCERPT MINUTES OF THE SEVENTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE
OF PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION,
HELD ON NOVEMBER 17, 2021**

This meeting was facilitated via the Zoom video conferencing program

PRESENT

Members of the Committee

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member

ABSENT/EXCUSED

Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Vice-Chairman
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP	Member

Secretariat

Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Researcher
Ms. Nicole Brown	Researcher

PUBLIC HEARING RE: 1st Hearing on the Examination of Unemployment during the COVID-19 Pandemic and the State's Capacity to Provide Support to Persons Who Became Unemployed as a Result Of the Pandemic

1.1. The meeting resumed in public at 10:17 a.m.

1.2. The following persons joined the meeting:

Ministry of Finance

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Ms. Yvonne Neemacharan | Deputy Permanent Secretary |
| 2. Mr. Anthony Joseph | Manager, Economic Management Division |
| 3. Mr. Calvin Maurice | Chief Executive Officer, NEDCO |

Ministry of Labour

- | | |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1. Ms. Natalie Willis | Permanent Secretary (Ag.) |
| 2. Ms. Sangeeta Boondoo | Senior Legal Officer |
| 3. Ms. Joann David | Director, On-the-Job Training Division |
| 4. Mr. Bruce Spencer | Head, Labour Market Information Unit |

Ministry of Social Development and Family Services

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1. Ms. Jacqueline Johnson | Permanent Secretary (Ag.) |
| 2. Mr. Michael Reid | Chief Technical officer |
| 3. Mr. Seon Raymond | Director, Social Investigations Division |
| 4. Mr. Brennan Gowrie | Director, Monitoring and Evaluation |

Tobago House of Assembly

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Mr. Elon Mayo | Director of Labour |
|------------------|--------------------|

Opening Statements

1.3. The aforementioned chief officials gave brief opening remarks.

Key Issues Discussed

1.4. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Finance (MOF)**:

Types of Support Provided

- i. The Ministry of Finance was responsible for the Salary Relief Grant. Eligibility Requirements for this grant included:
 - Date unemployment took place during the pandemic
 - Applicant should not be a recipient of any other grants
 - Applicant must be a national of Trinidad and Tobago and provide a National ID Card
- ii. NEDCO was responsible for administrating the Entrepreneurial Relief Grant. Submission requirements for this grant included:
 - Certificate of Registration
 - Proof of Address
 - Financial Records
 - Invoices for the eligible period to support loss claims
 - Receipts

Challenges Experienced

- iii. The major challenge experienced in Phase I of the Salary Relief Grant was that the application process was entirely manual. As such, there was a long processing time.
- iv. For Phase II, the Ministry utilised a completely online application system, which reduced the processing time.
- v. NEDCO also reported that processing time was slowed down due to technical issues.
- vi. There were several applications that did not meet the eligibility criteria.
- vii. Some of the reasons applications were denied included:
 - Duplicate applications
 - Applications from non-nationals
 - Incomplete applications
 - Applicants accessed relief funds from other Government services
- viii. The Ministry intends to complete the process of distributing outstanding cheques by the end of November and distributing funds via debit cards by the beginning of December

Data provided

- ix. 7,045 Salary Relief Grant applicants were unsuccessful. One major reason given for these applications being denied was that the period of unemployment fell outside of the required period.
- x. The Criteria for funding from the Ministry of Finance were:
 - Date of unemployment between April 28 and May 31
 - National of Trinidad and Tobago
 - Not in receipt of any other grant funding

Additional Support Provided

- xi. NEDCO provided skills training and mentorship for 2,500 people
- xii. The MoF reported that it operated a help line for applicants to call to follow-up on their applications

1.5. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS)**

Statistics on the processing of applications

- i. In Phase I of its relief efforts, the MSDF approved 59,716 Income Support applications and rejected 4,940
- ii. In Phase II, 1,271 applications were approved while 5,472 were rejected
- iii. The majority of applicants were in the 31-45 age group

- iv. The MSDF reported that the majority of applicants were employed in construction, retail, roadside vending and restaurant services.
- v. Some of the major reasons for applications being rejected were as follows:
 - Applicants with NIS numbers were ineligible and therefore referred to the Ministry of Finance
 - Effective date of retrenchment was earlier than March 2020
 - Applicants were accessing funds from multiple sources
 - Incomplete applications
 - Applicants were non-nationals with no official status
- vi. In Phase I, 61% of applicants were male, 35% of applicants were female and 4% did not specify their gender.
- vii. In Phase II, 45% of applicants were female and 51% of applicants were male

Processing of Applications

- viii. The MSDF provided the following types of assistance:
 - Income Support
 - Food Support
 - Rental Grant
- ix. 15 media releases were published to provide information on the application process
- x. A call centre was set up to provide information about applications and was also utilised to inform applicants when their cheques were ready
- xi. The MSDFS was overwhelmed by the volume of applications and therefore received assistance of external validators
- xii. The National Insurance Board and First Citizens Bank assisted with printing cheques
- xiii. Cheques were distributed via TTPost. However, not all cheques were delivered as the addresses provided were no longer valid
- xiv. The MSDF placed announcements in the major local newspapers regarding cheques that were undelivered. Of the 576 cheques in question, 265 applicants responded to the announcement and were able to have their cheques re-printed.
- xv. Banks have returned funds distributed through the Automatic Clearing House (ACH) system due to accounts listed by applicants being closed.

- 1.6. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Tobago House of Assembly: Division of Community Development and Enterprise Development:**

Situational Analysis of Unemployment Support in Tobago

- i. The Division has not been able to capture data on under-employment in Tobago.
- ii. The sectors most affected by unemployment in Tobago due to the Covid-19 pandemic are the hospitality sector and the construction sector.

- iii. The Department of Community Development has provided skills re-training for individuals affected by unemployment due to the pandemic.
- iv. The Department of Labour has partnered with the Ministry of Labour to assist retrenched individuals with the job search process.
- v. The Division assisted affected businesses and disbursed approximately 293 Covid business grants, 28 tourism grants, 6 Covid loans and 30 non-Covid grants.
- vi. Tourism grants were given to businesses within the tourism industry and amounted to a total disbursement of \$1,088,645.57
- vii. Individual applicants were referred to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

1.7. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Labour**:

Statistics provided

- i. Based on information gathered from the Central Statistical Office, the Ministry of Labour indicated that there was a net reduction of 11,700 in the number of people with jobs in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the corresponding period in 2019. The Ministry provided the following key observations for that period:
 - There were job gains for approximately 60,000-70,000 people.
 - The major job gains were experienced in the Agriculture sector (increase of 8,800 workers), the Petroleum sector (increase of 4,300 workers) and the Financing and Insurance sector (increase of 5,000 workers).
 - The sectors most affected by job losses are as follows
 - a) Manufacturing (reduction of 16,700 workers or 37.7%)
 - b) Construction (reduction of 12,100 workers or 15.9%)
 - c) Community and Personnel Services (reduction of 4,700 workers or 2.2%)
 - d) Wholesale and Retail (reduction of 10,600 workers or 10.1%)

Labour Disputes and other Industrial Relations matters

- ii. The Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy Division of the Ministry has been active in providing information to the public about rights and responsibilities of employers and employees.
- iii. The Ministry of Labour informed the Committee that Compliance Officers with the National Insurance Board (NIB) hold the responsibility of investigating complaints of employers not making NIS contributions on behalf of employees.
- iv. Employees can lodge complaints with the Labour Inspectorate Unit of the Ministry of Labour if they are not receiving benefits they are entitled to. The Unit provides guidance to employees and also contacts employers regarding complaints when required.

- v. The current Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act contains provisions for reporting retrenchment of 5 or more employments to the Ministry of Labour. However, during the pandemic, the Ministry issued a public advisory that regardless of size, all retrenchments should be reported to the Ministry.
- vi. The Ministry of Labour utilised digital platforms to engage the public with regard to the process of lodging industrial relations complaints.

ADJOURNMENT

- 1.8. The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 12:31 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

December 06, 2021

Appendix III– Minutes of 8th Meeting

**EXCERPT MINUTES OF THE EIGHTH MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE OF
PARLIAMENT ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION,
HELD ON DECEMBER 08, 2021**

This meeting was facilitated via the Zoom video conferencing program

PRESENT

Members of the Committee

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Ms. Pennelope Beckles, MP	Member
Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member

ABSENT/EXCUSED

Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Vice-Chairman
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Secretariat

Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Researcher
Ms. Nicole Brown	Researcher

PUBLIC HEARING RE: 2nd Hearing on the Examination of Unemployment during the COVID-19 Pandemic and the State's Capacity to Provide Support to Persons Who Became Unemployed as a Result Of the Pandemic

1.1. The meeting resumed in public at 10:25 a.m.

1.2. The following persons joined the meeting:

Ministry of Labour

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Ms. Natalie Willis | Permanent Secretary (Ag.) |
| 2. Ms. Sengeeta Boondoo | Senior Legal Officer |
| 3. Ms. Sabina Gomez | Chief Labour Relations Officer |
| 4. Mr. Bruce Spencer | Head, Labour Market Information Unit |

Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association

- | | |
|---------------------|----------|
| 1. Mr. George Naime | Director |
| 2. Mr. Dale Parson | Director |

Banking Insurance and General Workers Union

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Mr. Trevor Johnson | General Secretary |
| 2. Mr. Jason Brown | 2nd Vice President |

Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Mr. Mark Edghill | President |
| 2. Ms. Vashti G. Guyadeen | Chief Executive Officer |

Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Mr. Peter Farmer | Secretary General |
|---------------------|-------------------|

Amalgamated Workers Union

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Michael Prentice | President General |
|---------------------|-------------------|

Opening Statements

1.3. The aforementioned chief officials gave brief opening remarks.

Key Issues Discussed

1.4. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries (TTCSI)**:

Grants

- i. The challenges encountered by business owners in accessing grants provided by the State due to their inability to meet the eligibility criteria;
- ii. The salary relief grants were available to selected sectors, as such, employees of sectors deemed essential, who were laid-off during the grant period of May/June, were not eligible to receive the grant;
- iii. There was ambiguity when applying for the grant. Applicants whose last salary was on April 29, 2021 and become unemployed as at May 01, 2021 were not eligible to receive the grant.
- iv. According to information received from the TTCSI, all grants applied for by their membership in 2020 were received, however, in 2021 only 10% of the grants applied for were received.

Initiatives by Organisation

- v. The TTCSI indicated that their collaboration with the Ministry of Trade and Industry assisted persons who were non-compliant to become compliant in order to access the grant.
- vi. The TTCSI has also attempted to lobby the government and the Ministry of Health to allow all closed sectors to return to work.
- vii. The cultural and creative industries has sought the assistance of the TTCSI to increase their compliance and register their businesses during the pandemic.
- viii. The tourism sector has begun the creation and implementation of a comprehensive 'staycation' campaign to be refined in time for the reopening of the sector.
- ix. TTCSI to assist 80 firms, in the first instance, within the business and professional services sector with the ability to win new markets. This will be facilitated through their Gateway to Trade programme, with a nine (9) month training programme focusing on marketing, website development, export and market connections.

Sectors most affected by COVID-19 pandemic

- x. Preliminary data from TTCSI indicated that the tourism sector, sport services, personal care services, and day care services were among the sectors most adversely affected by the pandemic, as these sectors were yet to reopen.
- xi. TTCSI also indicated that the business and professional services sector (i.e. consultants, IT professionals, architects) had flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic as these sectors were able to pivot and adapt with the aid of technology.
- xii. The TTCSI highlighted that its comprehensive report on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sectors amongst its membership will be completed by the end of 2021.

Vaccination Policy

- xiii. The TTCSI indicated that instituting a mandatory vaccination policy will be challenging as the vaccination requirements of each sectors may differ depending on the work environment within that sector.

- 1.5. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Banking Insurance and General Workers Union (BIGWU)**:

Industrial Relation Matters

- i. Between 100 to 300 unvaccinated workers within the financial sectors received warning letters.
- ii. There were less than 10 industrial relations matters against employers, received by the trade unions that were referred to the Industrial Court.
- iii. Each matter is important as it can set a precedence within the sector for how other employers will treat with these matters going forward.
- iv. Meaningful consultations are needed between the employers and the trade union regarding the vaccination policy, change in work hours and the operational policy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initiatives by Organisation

- v. BIGWU and the Joint Trade Union Movement (JTUM) completed a paper highlighting the pros and cons of work-from-home.
- vi. BIGWU also conducted a risk assessment with the Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) to present to the financial institutions.
- vii. BIGWU, together with JTUM held a meeting with the Chambers of Commerce to discuss their position re: the COVID-19 pandemic situation and make recommendations to get business sectors reopened.
- viii. BIGWU interfaced with the employers on behalf of employees to reduce the rate of retrenchment.

- 1.6. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union (ACAWU)**:

Grants

- i. As at December 08, 2021, no members of the ACAWU who applied for the Income Support Grant, has received the payment.

Initiatives by Organisation

- ii. The ACAWU coordinated with umbrella trade union bodies to lobby with Ministries distributing the grants to assist the members who have not yet received their grants.
- iii. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services (MSDFS) advised the ACAWU that the grants were approved but the Ministry is awaiting funds to disburse the grants.

Sectors most affected by COVID-19 pandemic

- iv. Caribbean Airlines Limited (CAL) refused to institute a rotational approach to the employment situation. Instead employees on active duty received a 5% to 10% salary reduction while persons not on active duty received a 100% salary reduction.
- v. ACAWU indicated that, as at December 15, 2021, all persons laid off will be back out to work.

1.7. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Ministry of Labour:**

Vaccination Policy

- i. A draft paper on a possible vaccination policy and guidelines was before the Cabinet for approval.
- ii. The policy framework includes consultations with the employers and workers and other stakeholders to provide information on the effect of policy and the enforcement of the policy on the employees and employers.
- iii. The responsibility for the creation of a work-from-home policy belongs to the Ministry of Planning and Development while the MOL will be assisting with the drafting of the policy.

1.8. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers Association:**

General Information:

- i. TTMA identified the following issues with the grant distribution for pandemic:
 - a. the need for a social safety net i.e. an NIS unemployment relief programme;
 - b. the need for a review of the National Insurance System in Trinidad and Tobago;
 - c. the need to create a programme that allows the business community and the labour force to interface and collectively provide meaningful contributions to the system.
- ii. The manufacturing sector was not significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and was still expected to double the manufacturing output by 2025.

1.9. The following are the main issues arising from discussions with the **Amalgamated Workers Union:**

General Information:

- i. The Amalgamated workers union represents workers from the following organisations:
 - a. Bermudez;
 - b. East Side and New City Mall;
 - c. Royal Castle; and
 - d. Port of Spain City Corporation.

Sectors most affected by COVID-19 pandemic

- ii. The union also reported that the fast food sector was most affected by the State's Covid-19 response measures especially because this sector was not classified as essential

Grants

- iii. The Amalgamated Workers Union indicated that there were persons who applied for grants, were approved but have not yet received the grant payment.

Initiatives by Organisation

- iv. The trade union waived union dues for the members laid-off due to the pandemic restrictions.
- v. The union has also endeavoured to settle its industrial relations matters outside of the court and there are still some outstanding matters to be settled.

ADJOURNMENT

- 1.10. The meeting was adjourned accordingly at 12:29 p.m.

I certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

Chairman

Secretary

February 14, 2021

Appendix IV – Verbatim Notes of 7th Meeting

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE SEVENTH VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE HELD (IN PUBLIC) ON WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2021, AT 10.15 A.M.

PRESENT

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Ms. Penelope Beckles	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Nicole Brown	Graduate Research Assistant

ABSENT

Mr. Roger Monroe	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member [<i>Excused</i>]
Ms. Vandana Mohit	Member

MINISTRY OF FINANCE

Ms. Yvonne Neemacharan	Deputy Permanent Secretary, Strategic Management Execution Officer, SMEO
Mr. Anthony Joseph	Manager, Economic Management Division
Mr. Calvin Maurice	Chief Executive Officer, NEDCO

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SERVICES

Ms. Jacqueline Johnson	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Mr. Michael Reid	Chief Technical officer
Mr. Seon Raymond	Director, Social Investigations Division
Mr. Brennan Gowrie	Director, Monitoring and Evaluation

MINISTRY OF LABOUR

Ms. Natalie Willis	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Ms. Sangeeta Boondoo	Senior Legal Officer
Ms. Joann David	Director, On-the-Job Training Division
Mr. Bruce Spencer	Head, Labour Market Information Unit

THA, DIVISION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND ENTERPRISE

DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Elon Mayo	Director of Labour
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Mr. Chairman: Good morning and welcome to the viewing and listening audience to this the seventh meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. This is the Committee's first hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its examination of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the State's capacity to provide support to persons who became unemployed a result of the pandemic.

Members of the public are invited to submit their comments on the Parliament's social media platforms including: YouTube channel *ParlView* or via our Facebook and Twitter feeds. Thank you so much for joining us. We are happy to welcome members of this Committee. I am the Committee's Chairman, Paul Richards. At this point, I will invite members to please introduce themselves starting with member Forde.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: There are three other members on this Committee who are also unable to be with us this morning, member Roger Monroe, Member of Parliament, and also member Rohan Sinanan, Sen. Rohan Sinanan. So they would not be with us, there are conflicting engagements. The stakeholders with us this morning are going to be representatives from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and the Tobago House of Assembly.

At this time, I would like to invite—well, we will go to that in a short while. Let me just go through the four objectives of this enquiry before we ask our stakeholders to introduce themselves and their teams.

The four objectives of the enquiry are:

1. to examine the trends in unemployment and job losses in the private and public sector during the COVID-19 pandemic;

2. to assess the unemployment relief strategies and programmes of the state during the COVID-19 pandemic;
3. to examine the proposed strategies of the state to stimulate job creation and employment opportunities to counteract the adverse economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic; and
4. to examine the changes in the operations of the private sector aimed at sustaining business during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I might add that although we did—the title of the enquiry is an: “Examination of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the State’s capacity to provide support to persons who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic.” We would like to contextualize it in a way that we know during the pandemic there was full unemployment which some people have suffered but there was also underemployment or partial employment and some persons may have had their terms and conditions changed. So we wanted to provide a holistic examination of the issue before us. In addition to, while many may think of the unemployment issue as solely an issue that deals with income, we also want to, in part, examine some aspects of the social and psychological impact that job losses or reduction in employment may have created in the pandemic to look at a wider picture even in the context of our enquiry title.

So we thank you for joining us this morning and we appreciate you being with us. At this time, I would like to introduce the stakeholders before us, which include officials of the Ministry of Finance; officials of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; officials of the Ministry of Labour and officials of the Tobago House of Assembly, Division of Community Development and Enterprise Development. And we can start with the Deputy Permanent Secretary, Strategic Management Execution Office in the Ministry of Finance, Ms. Yvonne “Neemacaran”, Neema—sorry—charan and please introduce yourself and your team and you can also deliver brief opening comments.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much and I am glad I got your name pronounced right eventually, Ms. Neemacharan. Did I get it right?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes. You did get it right, Chairman. I have a very brief statement which I will make now.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, please.

Ms. Neemacharan: So good morning, again, Chairman, and members of the Social Services and Public Administration Committee, my colleagues from the Ministry of Finance, attendees from other Ministries, and all others present in the meeting this morning. The Ministry of Finance is cognizant of the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the unemployment situation in our country. And we would have instituted a suite of measures targeted to promote economic relief for individuals and businesses. The Ministry of Finance, we have made a concerted effort to provide the appropriate responses to the issues outlined in your correspondence to us and we hope the information submitted will assist the Committee in its deliberations.

Also, the Ministry representatives present here this morning are willing to assist the Committee with its further deliberations and hope that our contribution will assist in a meaningful way of achieving the goals of the Government and the Committee in addressing this very important issue under consideration. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, Ms. Neemacharan, of the Ministry of Finance. I will move next to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, and we welcome Permanent Secretary, Ms. Jacqueline Johnson. Ms. Johnson, go ahead, please.

[Introductions made]

Ms. Johnson: Chair, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services continues to support the efforts necessary to assist persons impacted by the COVID pandemic through the existing grant in social services system. We welcome the examination to be undertaken today as this can provide insights into the Ministry's continuing efforts and the strategies to build the social sector system and the lives of the vulnerable families and individuals that we serve. I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Ms. PS Johnson. We move now to the officials of the Ministry of Labour and the acting PS, Ms. Natalie Willis. Ms. Willis.

[Introductions made]

Ms. Willis: The Ministry of Labour recognizes the critical role in ensuring that poverty is reduced and that we have grappled economic stability within the country. The Ministry recognizes that it facilitates this through its vision of facilitating decent work, equal opportunities for all and maintaining a stable industrial and legal climate.

With regard to this enquiry, the Ministry notes that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the lives and livelihoods of persons and has impacted significantly the employment of persons. The Ministry looks forward to the discussion that we will be pursuing this

morning and the recommendations and strategies that will come out of it. I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, Ms. PS Willis and we move now to the officials of the Tobago House of Assembly, Division of Community Development and Enterprise Development, Mr. Mayo, the Director of Labour. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Mayo: Good morning to everyone. My name is Elon Mayo. I am the Manpower and Labour Relations Director for the department of labour under the Division of Community Development and Enterprise Developmental Labour, under the Tobago House of Assembly. Welcome to the Chair, welcome to Trinidad and Tobago.

The Tobago House of Assembly, specifically the Division of Community Development and Enterprise Developmental Labour, we fully understand the precedence of this Committee and we also understand the aspects of what has to be discussed. We hope that our submission provides some insight into our efforts to help with the underemployment of Tobagonians in Tobago and we look forward to any recommendations to help us go forward. I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr. Mayo. At this time, I would just like to advise stakeholders to please direct your questions, concerns and comments through me, the Chair. We remind members to kindly activate your microphone on your devices when you are acknowledged by the Chair and turn off your microphone when you have concluded your contributions. It is also important to remember that this is being streamed and broadcasted, so your camera picks up everything behind and around you, if people are moving around behind you. So please be mindful of that reality. Okay. So we will start now.

I would like to direct the first question to the Ministry of Finance and Deputy PS, Ms. Yvonne Neemacharan. Deputy PS, give us a sense—of course, this was a transition that the State had to execute quite quickly and there were some challenges at the start of the pandemic in terms of applications for support and for persons who became unemployed and also businesses that were facing challenges. Give us a sense of the main challenges experienced by the Ministry and how you have mitigated or remediated those over the last 18 or so months.

Ms. Neemacharan: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the question. So I will start with perhaps the Salary Relief Grant which was the one that the Ministry of Finance was directly involved in. The other measures we would have had different agencies and different institutions executing those. So one of the main challenges with that particular programme was the manual system. We had used manual forms, the application form that had to be completed by the applicants, submitted

and then transferred into a database. So because of the manual nature, the process was a little bit longer. So the grant did not reach in the time that we would have liked.

In the new phase, phase two as we call it, of the same programme, we have instituted a totally electronic system where the forms that are done online. We no longer have the manual systems so there was not be added process of inputting it into an electronic system. That has certainly reduced the time frame. Also, we had a challenge where persons might have applied for both the Salary Relief Grant and the income support at the Ministry because—so what we have done to mitigate that is we matched our applicants from both sides, so we are now matching so that we have only one client receiving a grant, either the salary relief through the NIB system or the income support. I would ask Mr. Maurice to probably share if there were any on the entrepreneurial—

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Mr. Maurice: Thank you very much. We immediately started with an online system to have applications received into NEDCO. And there were two issues with that. One, based on the number of applications received in the initial instance, created some technical issues in regard to the electronic arrangement. We eventually, of course, dealt with that. The other issue would have been the speed in which NEDCO initially would have responded given the various technical issues. Because we immediately went online and also virtual, in regard to examining the application through virtual visits and the various aspects of keeping a measure of quality assurance within terms of delivery of the service. And that initial instant took some time for us to settle in, but we eventually did.

The third issue would have been, just as the PS indicated, would have been streamlining those applications that would have gotten grants in other areas. So therefore, there would have been a need to cross-reference these applicants to ensure that we are providing the grants to the ones that are in compliance with the arrangement. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Just before I go to member Singh, for the DPS, could you give us a sense of the prerequisites to persons for the Income Support Grant? And to Mr. Maurice, for the businesses that would have received or applied for the business support grants, what were the prerequisites and what were the main anomalies in terms of they being able to supply the data that the Ministry and NEDCO required to one, approve, and two, facilitate the smooth transfer of those support grants? Because in the public domain there was quite a bit of conversation about employers

not paying X and persons not having the ID material and being registered X and Y, which would have impacted negatively, the ability to, one, apply for, and two, receive these grants.

So if I could start with the DPS on that, the main reasons to applicants being unsuccessful in the support grants and also, the securing a loan. And from NEDCO's perspective, the prerequisites and what are the follow-ups in terms of these businesses if NEDCO has followed-up to see which businesses were able to stay afloat even though the grant was limited and what kind of data you were able to glean from that process? So we can start with DPS on that, please.

Ms. Neemacharan: Thank you, Chair. I will be able to speak on the Salary Relief Grant. You mentioned the income support and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services might be better able because they process that particular grant.

Mr. Chairman: Sure.

Ms. Neemacharan: Is that okay?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, thanks. That is fine.

Ms. Neemacharan: With respect to—

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead.

Ms. Neemacharan: With respect to the—

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, Ms. Neemacharan.

Ms. Neemacharan: Okay. Sorry. With respect to the Salary Relief Grant, the eligibility criteria with the date that the person became unemployed, that they must not be in receipt of any other support, any other grants, because we wanted to facilitate those who are totally without support. And they must be well—of course, a national and the ID card was one of the requirements to support that.

The issues coming out of those are that persons would have put the incorrect or the date outside of the eligible dates, they would have provided part of their ID information, they might provide only the front not the back with the data. So those are some of the challenges that we had and the criteria that was required.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Mr. Maurice?

Mr. Maurice: Thank you very much. The criteria in regard to accessing the Entrepreneurial Relief Grant would have been certificate of registration of the business; identification of the owner of the business; proof of address; financial records; invoices spent in the period we were reimbursing or supporting the business in terms of loss; receipts, if available. Some of the problems we had with

that or one of the main problems we had with that would have been applicants providing the information on a timely basis, which kept back or slowed the process of processing the application. So that was one of the major issues more or less I would say in regard to that particular area.

As it relates to applications that were unsuccessful, there were 270 applications that were unsuccessful and that was basically because of some of them being non-nationals, some of them had already received a grant, one of the other Ministries, and simply others who did not provide the information to complete the application process. What we have done since then, however, is to follow-up in the first instance because we will be doing a trace of study post-disbursement that will pick up more information. But in the first instance, we wanted to find out from the applicants what other support do you need so that we can carry you through this period? And in our survey we had—at that time when we did the survey, there would have been 1,488 applications; of that, 676 responded. And the greater group—so you had a balanced group of male and females in terms of the respondents and the age group would have been—53 per cent would have been between the age group of 36 to 50 years of age.

The smaller group would have been between 26 to 35 years of age making up 28 per cent in terms of the response. Most of them, however, asked for further training, mentorship, which we also did through our webinars. We covered over nearly 2,500 training and mentorship programmes thus far with regard to applicants. They came from the—most of them came from the retail sector and 11.5 per cent came from the clothing sector. So essentially, we are keeping in touch with these applicants. Most of them had employed less than five employees, those persons who responded in our initial survey. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Member Singh, stand by with your question, please. Just before we go to you, member Singh, DPS, your submission stated that 490 payments were rejected by the Automated Clearing House, ACH system and are now being processed for payment via debit cards. Two-part question before we go to member Singh, what is the estimated time frame for the completion of these outstanding payments? And is there an arrangement in place to provide the applicants with a status update on the processing of these applications, these 490 payments that were initially rejected by ACH?

Ms. Neemacharan: Thank you, Chair. The estimated time for the debit cards to be prepared could be to the end of this year. The debit card takes us—the ACH—sorry, the debit card takes a little while because it is a facility we have to engage the FCB, the bank for. And the status—can you

repeat the second question—the second part of the question?

Mr. Chairman: Second part, is there an arrangement—did you contact the applicants who are on standby, the 490—

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: —to let them know well it is going to be in this time frame or that time frame?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes. We have a call back system where we call the applicants to provide a status on their applications.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Forde has a question on this and then we go to member Singh, please.

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To the acting PS at the Ministry of Finance, as coincidentally only yesterday, a young lady who resides in my community enquired of me to find out about a Salary Relief Grant. She applied initially, right, which I presume she is probably part of this 490 that is here. She said she submitted everything, her bank documents and everything as the case may be. So I believe an individual like that fits into this category that they should be contacted and should receive their Salary Relief Grants sometime between now and at the end of the year as you have stated. Just reiterate that point for me, please, thanks.

Ms. Neemacharan: Thank you for the question. They should be contacted. However, I cannot say that she may be within the 490 applicants because they will have to check and see what might be her issue for not having received her grant already.

Mr. Forde: Well, that is the point—

Mr. Chairman: Well, I am glad you mentioned that because is it that if someone was ineligible for whatever reason, they were actually contacted by the Ministry and said, “Well, we realized you have applied but you are ineligible and will not be getting the grant.” Because that has been a point of contention, people do not know whether they have been rejected for the grant for whatever reason and they are still in limbo waiting—well, maybe I will get the grant maybe I would not get the grant, maybe it will come in six months. Is there a process in place to identify the people, well, you have been deem ineligible and you will not be getting any grant for X or Y reason?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes. We have put in place a call system. Because of the number of applicants, not all persons would have been contacted already but, yes, we have special numbers assigned and we do have a call system to the applicants to give them an update on where their—what is the status of their application.

Mr. Chairman: Just before I go to member Singh again, would you have data on how many persons were rejected from the overall applications and a percentage of rejections compared to those who would have been approved and/or received? If you do not—

Ms. Neemacharan: I have the data present for—

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, please.

Ms. Neemacharan: The data with respect to the second phase, we have 23,234 persons who applied for the grant. Of that 7,045, at this time are deemed unsuccessful.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. So, roughly one-third.

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Member Singh, go ahead, please.

10.45 a.m.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning again everyone. To the team from the Ministry of Finance: I am curious to know—because I saw in your responses you did indicate for transparency and accountability purposes we have a data sharing arrangement between Ministry of Finance and Social Development and Family Services. I am curious to know if, however, we have picked up any persons in the system that, in local terms, double-dipped from these grants, in other words, persons accessing both of the grants and, you know, they may have fall through the crack in terms of our picking up on that data? And if we have, what took place or what transpired subsequent to that? With this response, I will ask a couple—[*Technical difficulties*]

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, DPS. I think the question is directed at you.

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes. Good morning. Thanks for the question, Mr. Singh. I did not hear the last part of it. We missed part of what he asked but I could answer the part about the comparison and what took place. So we did have a couple that we would have found. I do not have the number with me, but we did have applicants for both the income support and the Salary Relief Grant. The criteria is if you have a NIS number, it would be paid through the Salary Relief Grant, and if not, it will be paid through the income support system at the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. So depending on which grant the eligibility would fall under, it would be processed there only once. So that this time we avoided the possibility of having two payments from the two programmes paid to any one individual. The number of those I will have to provide of how many. And I think Mr. Singh would have asked another question that I did not hear the rest of his question. Our audio was bad.

Mr. Singh: You answered that part of it. Just to follow-up, in terms of the Ministry of Finance, I wanted to know, did the Ministry of Finance implement a complaints process for persons who may have queries, complaints? This is just to tie back, you know, what the Chairman was asking prior in terms of persons getting information from the Ministry of Finance in relation to the disbursement of these grants. So if you could just identify what complaints process is in place and how persons can access that complaints process?

Ms. Neemacharan: Like I said before, again, we had a call system. So there is a number that is available to call in to find out about their status or complain as you say. I do not have the phone number with me. I will try to access it during the meeting and I will share that. But that is the process. It is only a system where they can call in and we do have—that system is being used very actively. We are—as you could well imagine, in our day service, a lot of calls and we try to address them. So there is a system at our command centre which deals with the call ins.

Mr. Chairman: Member Singh, you are through or you have other follow-up questions? *[Pause]*
Member Singh, you are through?

Mr. Singh: I want to turn to—no, Mr. Chairman, I have one question for NEDCO.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Singh: Right. So in terms of the entrepreneurial grant facility, I wanted to have an idea in terms of what was the cost of establishing the e-platform that you mentioned for the processing of the applications? And in terms of this contractual arrangement, are we still with this company; or are they still providing technical support for the online platforms; or is it managed internally now? To NEDCO.

Mr. Maurice: Basically, we are still provided with that external support. If you wish, I can also mention the name. If not, I will hold on that in terms of the provider. But it is costing us an average of 2,500 per quarter. It can be—as I said, it is an average. So we have that contractual arrangement based on a quarterly—

Mr. Chairman: Is that TT or US dollars?

Mr. Maurice: TT. TT.

Mr. Chairman: \$2,500 a quarter?

Mr. Maurice: Yes, TT. So I can also confirm that through direct correspondence with the Committee after as well.

Mr. Singh: And, Chairman, last question on this.

Mr. Chairman: Please do. Go ahead.

Mr. Singh: Should the Ministry decide to engage in further public/private partnership arrangements, I wanted to get an idea of what industries or business sectors you all can forecast or determine that might be targeted into this public/private partnership arrangement in going forward? So anyone from the Ministry of Finance can answer this question.

Mr. Maurice: DPS, are you going to take the question?

Ms. Neemacharan: Mr. Joseph will take the question, Committee.

Mr. Joseph: Sorry, member. Yes, one of the industries we are looking at will be the maritime area. Okay? We could consider the area of ship repairs and other services in the maritime sector for PPPs. Also, we would have identified, as you may recall, the port of Port of Spain. We are looking for private sector participation in that area.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, go ahead, please.

Mr. Nakhid: Since we are talking, we have the Ministry of Finance here, I just want to ask the question as we spoke—mentioned the grants. I recall the Minister of Finance said in one of his contributions that of 24,000 applications—because I am hearing extremely low numbers here, but he said that of 24,000 applications, 4,000 applications for grants had been dealt with. Has that situation been ameliorated or what is the updated status of that if his remarks we would consider to be true?

Mr. Chairman: DPS, would that be the 23,234 that you identified as applications earlier on?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes. So I had it now—but the 24,000 though, as you have seen in the second bullet point, was the application that was received. But of that 24,000, 1,062 were identified as duplicates. Our response on question four. And then how many persons received the grants? For the period May to June, we had paid 12,695. So every day or each week we are processing. We do them in batches. So the numbers that would have shared, except for the amount that actually received or applied, the amount that is received will change continuously as we process them.

Mr. Nakhid: But—I appreciate very much that it has been better, distribution has been better, but you are talking about let us say 24,000 minus a 1,000 you said were duplicates. Let us give another 1,000 maybe for people who double-dipped and we are looking at about 22,000, you said 12,000 has been paid. Correct?

Ms. Neemacharan: Correct. Up to November 5th and—

Mr. Nakhid: Up to November?

Ms. Neemacharan: —during the last—yes—two weeks, we—

Mr. Nakhid: And these applications, as far as I remember, from the Minister of Finance who since April. How are the rest of the 10,000—how are they dealing with their lives? Have you any idea? How are they putting food on the table for their children? How is that being—

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid? Member Nakhid, that is not a question for this forum. And I understand your concern, but that is not a question that the DPS can answer.

Mr. Nakhid: So what forum is that a question for, Chairman? Which forum is that for, Chairman?

Mr. Chairman: It is not a question for this forum that the DPS cannot answer, member Nakhid, how people are putting food on their tables. Is there a question related to the information supplied that you would like to ask?

Mr. Nakhid: Yes. How soon then, Chairman, can that be expedited to facilitate the 10,000 people who have been waiting almost six, seven months to put food on the table for their children to be precise? Can she—can that be answered?

Mr. Chairman: DPS, is there a time frame within which this process can be completed?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes, Chairman. We are working toward the end of this month. I would also like to state that of the figures that we would have called, there were 7,000 who were unsuccessful. So that will reduce the 10,000. That is our—your C question: How many would have applied were unsuccessful? So just to bring the figures into context, and we are hoping to complete the process by November. However, I would have told you that the card, which takes a little bit longer, we hope to do that within the month of December. So this programme with the 24,000 should be completed by the end of November we are working towards or December for the cards.

Mr. Chairman: Any follow-up question, member Nakhid?

Mr. Nakhid: Well, wishing you all the best and hopefully by Christmas they will have some of these grants. So I thank you very much for your contribution.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Thank you, DPS. Let us move now to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Can I call on member Beckles to lead off the questioning, and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, please?

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So that I just wanted to get to—similar to what was provided by the Ministry of Finance, can you give an indication as to how many persons would not have been successful in

their application?

Ms. Neemacharan: Good morning, Ms. Beckles. Chairman, may I proceed?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, please.

Ms. Neemacharan: The question I understand it to be, how many were unsuccessful in their application? And with respect to the Salary Relief Grant, it is 7,045 in this phase two of the programme.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Can I make an enquiry as it relates to what sort of analysis is done on those 7,000? Could give us a sense as to why those persons were unsuccessful?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes. Generally, they would not have fallen within—they would not have met one of the criteria that was set out. Most of the time, it would have been because their unemployment will not have been in the stipulated date. So they may have been—this programme started in May and their last employment date should have been the 28th of April, and they may have not had that particular date. It might have been before. But that was the process for this phase.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So just for persons who are listening, again, could you just elaborate a bit on the criteria?

Ms. Neemacharan: Well, it would have been for a particular period when you would have been unemployed and that would have been from April 28th to May 31st, and you have to be a national of the country and not be in receipt of any other grant.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. And can I just ask one more question? Bearing in mind the issue of the technology and the challenges that are being faced because of COVID, what is the—is there another method outside the direct application to the Ministry of Finance?

Ms. Neemacharan: For this programme, we only use the direct. For the second phase, we used the direct online only. The first phase we had used the form itself to be completed but that had various issues, and to mitigate those, we used the online.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So just a question that I would normally get as a Member of Parliament, which is the difficulty if there are questions to be asked and, you know, in terms of generally being able to contact the Ministry, is there any special unit for like asking questions or any queries?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes, there is. We have what we call the command centre—the salary relief grant command centre. And I do have the numbers—

Ms. Beckles: Could you share that information, please?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes. The phone numbers are: 689-1493—

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Ms. Neemacharan: The other number is 800-6774.

Ms. Beckles: And that is—those are normal hours, Monday to Friday, 8.00 to 4.00?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes. Those are normal hours, Monday to Friday, 8.00 to 4.00.

Ms. Beckles: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: There are only two numbers—sorry to interrupt—

Ms. Beckles: Sure.

Mr. Chairman: —8.00 to 4.00 for people to receive information, and queries, and stuff like that? Was that adequate?

Ms. Neemacharan: Well, like I said before, it really was a lot of calls we got. So whether it is adequate, it is something we may have to look at but that is what was implemented. Apart from that, of course, persons would have contacted the Ministry directly. This is a centre that we had set up for this programme but we do get calls otherwise.

Mr. Chairman: But given the fact that there was no walk-in ability with this situation, was there an online portal additional to that?

Ms. Neemacharan: No. The portal was—yes, there is an email system that is being used. We would have contacted persons through their email as well because the form in itself—it was done through the email and the online.

Mr. Chairman: Member Beckles, you could go ahead, please.

Ms. Neemacharan: So for queries—

Mr. Chairman: Member Beckles, you can continue, please.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. I would come back for the time being. I think I will hold there for now.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Onto the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Could you give us the sense, like we did with the Ministry of Finance, of the overall number of applications, those that were successful, the reasons, the eligibility criteria and the reasons for those who would have been rejected, and your communication mechanism for those who would have been applying and receiving grants, please?

Ms. Johnson: Thank you, Chair. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services received a total of 69,484 applications and that 62,739 were for phase one of COVID, and 6,743 were for phase two of COVID. If I could focus on phase one initially, our applications came into the system via a company called iland originally, as well as via hard copies of applications dropped

off at the Ministries and their various regional offices. These applications, all 62,000, are hard documents which we have stored in boxes and we have been attempting to put those online. The issue—challenge—for us was in the processing stage and we did some things within that period to ensure that we expedite our payments by engaging some full-time validators to support the in-house staff. We did engage NIB and First Citizens Bank to support the printing of cheques, and TTPost to support the distribution of the cheques, and we created the call centre.

In phase two, to treat with the challenge what we did was create the electronic system and we established some business rules to treat with the application process to help us deal with the validation process, and then we again hired specialized validators to treat with the processing of the applications. We also did the data sharing part with the Ministry of Finance to ensure that we had no further double-dipping in the system.

In terms of the number for approved applications, we currently have 59,716 applications which were approved. At phase one, 4,940 rejected. In phase two, we have 1,271 applications approved, and we have 5,472 rejected.

Mr. Chairman: What were the main reasons for the rejections? And even before that, just so people looking on could get a sense of the eligibility criterion, what were the objectives in terms of eligibility criteria for these particular social support grants?

Ms. Johnson: Certainly, Chair. In phase one, the eligibility criteria were that:

- You had to have an identification card or a certificate of registration for non-nationals;
- You had to have your certificate of registration for your business if you were self-employed;
- You had to ensure that you had a proper declaration signed.

And these are our business rules.

- You had to ensure that your employer's information was included and the letter from the employer on the letterhead, the letter of the employer's ID in case of small businesses;
- Your employer's stamp;
- Your employee's payslip;
- The effective date of your retrenchment/termination;
- Reduced income must have been March 01, 2020;

- For employed members of the family: proof of earnings via job letter or payslip;
- Totalling earnings of the family must have been less than 10,000 after the statutory deductions; and
- The deadline for the application was July 31, 2020.

Chair, in phase one, we paid three grants. We paid the Income Support Grant, we paid the food support grant, and we did the rental grant. So those were the three grants we were offering and those were the general criteria governing the rules for validating the applications.

In addition, in phase one for those persons who were self-employed, besides the requirements above, they had to get a recommender who we identified must have some particular characteristics and the recommender had to know the applicant for at least three years, and the recommender was required to sign a document which was attached to the application. Those were the requirements for those persons who were self-employed.

Mr. Chairman: Before I go to member Beckles again and member Forde, and this is in terms of data gathering and analysis to your good self, Ms. Johnson, and then to the DPS Ministry of Finance. What would you have learnt in terms of analysis to be given the data that you would have collected for processing these eligible or ineligible people to be the vulnerable sectors in society? What does that demographic look like in terms of age, geographic location, sector employed, in that it would have been significantly impacted more than in another sector so that we get a sense of where the vulnerabilities are in the national space? Because I think this is a great opportunity that we could do that kind of analysis given the 69,000, almost 70,000 persons you identified earlier on and certainly it maybe representative of a wider need in society.

So I will start with Ms. Johnson on that, and then go to DPS from the Ministry of Finance's perspective, because this is also I think an opportunity for data collation and analysis.

Ms. Johnson: And Chair, I fully agree with you. In our submission at Appendix II we looked at the sex-disaggregated data and the age-disaggregated data, but in addition to that, we also looked at the geographical data that the information presented for us. So in terms of both phases, we had a predominance of men, for example, applying for the various grants. In terms of the age disaggregation, our predominant age group was the 31 to 45 age group in both phases. And in terms of the demographics, our major areas for applicants came— and I am just going to call the first seven. It would include: the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo region, San Juan/Laventille, Tunapuna/Piarco. Those were the key areas for us in terms of the areas where most of our

applicants came from. Those are some—

Mr. Chairman: Would you provide the actual numbers to the Committee in writing?

Ms. Johnson: Yes, we can provide that data.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. DPS, could you give a similar breakdown for us, please, if possible?

Ms. Neemacharan: Thanks, Chair. Unfortunately, the Ministry did not do that kind of analysis that the Social Development and Family Services Ministry did, but we can certainly undertake to do so and provide some form of data for the Committee.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. We will appreciate that when you submit it in writing. Ms. Johnson, would you also have a sense of the sectors that were most impacted in terms of employment based on the information that you would have gleaned in your application processes?

Ms. Johnson: We would—

Mr. Chairman: Then we can go to member Forde and member Beckles.

Ms. Johnson: Yes, Chair. In phase two, we were able to collect that data. And the sectors that we found most predominant in terms of unemployment were the construction industry, the retail establishment industry, and the persons who sell or offer for sale or drink on the streets, and restaurants. Those were the five—

Mr. Chairman: So persons who were self-employed primarily?

Ms. Johnson: Self-employed, yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Thank you. Member Forde?

Mr. Forde: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Madam PS, in your submission also provided a breakdown of the application details of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services COVID relief grants. On page 5, question 3(c), “Please indicate various reasons for applications being rejected?” Right? Because we would have, you know, received complaints of individuals that, you know, were not successful in receiving some of the grants. So could you identify some of the various reasons that could have been possible for some persons not qualifying for these grants? Thank you.

Ms. Johnson: Certainly, Chair. The reasons are varied. I will—we did an analysis of all our applicants who were rejected and the reasons fall within about 25 categories. I will just—

Mr. Forde: “Ooh”.

Ms. Johnson:—mention the main one for phase—

Mr. Forde: Yes, appreciated.

Ms. Johnson: A lot of our applicants had NIS numbers, and once you had an NIS number, your application was sent to the Ministry of Finance. The Ministry of Social Development and Family Services were not allowed to make payments of the Income Support Grant to persons who had an NIS number on their application. So that was one of the main reasons. One of—the second reason was the effective date of the retrenchment or loss of income was not March of 2020 and that resulted in the rejection there.

We have clients who were double-dipping and we removed them. They might have been paid already by the Ministry of Finance. The employer information was missing on some of the applications. Some of the sectors were ineligible and this would be people who were public officers and maybe already receiving their salary, applying here for the grant. We also have application forms which did not have the required documentation, such as the identification card or the persons was clearly a foreigner without any form of registration in the country. So those were some of the main reasons why applicants were rejected.

11.15 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Were the public officers reported?

Ms. Johnson: “Ahh”, no—

Mr. Chairman: Sorry to put you on the spot but it seems obscene. “Doh answer that.” [*Laughter*] Member Beckles and then member Nakhid and member Singh. “Doh answer that PS, please.” You will put yourself in trouble. Off the record.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So I just want to continue on the—from MP Forde, I want to ask a question, you know, based on the criteria, and thank, of course, PS Johnson for your detail. Now, is there an educational component in this particular exercise? I asked that because it is a lot of information, the criteria and what you are presenting to us. I do not know whether in your data analysis—for example, you have found that people have to provide information, whether the application is short and you know whether they have to submit over and over. I just wanted to get a sense as to whether you can provide any information on that. If that has been the experience or you find that most of the applications, people are successful first or second time in terms of presenting the information requested.

The other issue has to do with whether or not people are officially informed when they do not meet the criteria. In other words, the number of persons that were rejected, are they officially informed and are they advised as to what is the reason why they were not successful?

And following up on the Chairman's question, is there any—I know you gave information I think on the first phase in terms of the number of men that have applied, do you have any data in terms of the number of women that have applied? Thank you.

Ms. Johnson: Chair, can I start with the percentage of women?

Mr. Chairman: Please do. Please do.

Ms. Johnson: In terms of our overall, in phase one, we had 61 per cent male, 35 per cent female and 4 per cent who did not indicate. And in phase two, we had 45 per cent female and 51 per cent male.

Mr. Chairman: Before you answer member Beckles' question, is that a reflection of a person who may be heading a household, applying on behalf of the household? Because it seems counter to the global statistics and women being disproportionately affected in terms of employment during the pandemic.

Ms. Johnson: Chairman, it may be because of the validation process and that would require detail—a further detail analysis plan for this data by the Ministry but it may be at variance with the gender impact assessment that was done at the Office of the Prime Minister. We have to look closer at the data generated from that study with what has been generated here from our application process.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Ms. Johnson: So I cannot say with any—

Ms. Beckles: Can I ask one more question on that? In terms of the data that you have presented about the persons rejected, are you able to as well give the analysis of that, male and female?

Ms. Johnson: Yes. We can but I do not have it, Chair, with me at this point in time.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: You can supply in writing, please, PS.

Ms. Johnson: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid and then member Singh, please.

Ms. Johnson: Chair, I think I have two questions to answer from—

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, you can complete the answering. Sorry about that, my apologies. And then member Nakhid and member Singh. My apologies.

Ms. Johnson: In terms of pre-educating the public on the application process, the Ministry has sent out approximately 15 media releases and information pieces on the newspaper and on our

website indicating the process for applications. I do not know whether that would have been adequate but it seems in my view to be a lot. So the information has been out there in terms of who can apply and how to apply.

The information on whether you were rejected was shared via the call centre which we established in May 2020. Persons call this centre to determine the status of their application and we also have a system in place where we call applicants whose cheques are ready for collection. Chair, we are still engaged in that exercise because a lot of people did not collect their cheques. Cheques have to be revalidated and persons have to be called again to come and collect their cheques, and there are still quite a bit of outstanding cheques which remain uncollected. We also use WhatsApp as a method for contacting applicants.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Hon. Member: No problem.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you very much.

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, member Forde.

Mr. Forde: Could the PS provide that information to us in writing, please? The number of cheques and the quantum and the value and stuff because, you know, we have been hearing the negative side sometimes coming from the public on, you know, no grants were paid, people have not received their grants but now we are hearing also that there are individuals where payments are due. So it would be interesting that if we can be supplied with that information or probably even now as we are in the viewing public, if she can just give us like some total figures, some total numbers, just so that the listening public can have an appreciation for it. I do not know, Mr. Chairman, if we have the time or you prefer for it to be provided in writing.

Mr. Chairman: But if PS has it now, we will appreciate it. But if not, in writing would be appropriate. I have no problem with that. Thank you.

Ms. Johnson: Chair, we just had NIB print 265 cheques. We got those cheques on Friday and we are going to advertise and it has gone to our call centre already to get those 265 persons to come in to collect their cheques. That was part of a bulk of cheques returned by TTPost which were not delivered because the addresses on the applications were wrong and the telephone numbers on the applications were also wrong. So that is a batch of 576 cheques. We did put out an advertisement to have those people come in and correct their information. We got 265 persons coming in. We

asked the NIB to reprint those cheques and we have those cheques being handed out from today via the public.

We also have the banks returning the moneys we paid via the ACH system because the applicant's account might have been closed. We are trying to sort out those as best as possible so that we could pay via a cheque to the applications. So all those things are currently being addressed.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Singh.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman, I must say the responses and the information supplied by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services have really been forthcoming and very, very succinct.

Mr. Chairman: I am glad you mentioned that. I was just telling the Secretariat that I have to commend the PS, Ministry of Social Development.

Mr. Singh: Yeah, I must say so because—and I also want to take the opportunity to really congratulate and thank this Ministry for, you know, being the frontline Ministry, especially at a time when our population is significantly seeking these services, and the goods and services of this Ministry. And in the execution of their work, I want to place on record my appreciation and congratulations because I do not know if maybe I have missed it because in the past, you know, you would always hear that term of corruption in these types of services, especially when a state entity is giving out grants and funds and all of these support—income support and so on. I do not know if I missed it but I did not really hear anything in the public domain about persons defrauding, staff defrauding and corruption and things like that. I want to commend this Ministry and the Permanent Secretary and by extension, their line Minister for a job well done.

I also want to stick “ah lil pin” in relation to I want to get a sense of feedback from this Ministry in terms of the support from the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries via the market boxes. I know it was a new initiative being rolled out and I know it is going to continue and it is very, very good and promising news to the farming population which, of course, the whole population knows, you know, I may have a little bias towards because I am in that Ministry. But what is that sense of—from the receivers of these grants, especially the food boxes and the market boxes? Did they appreciate it? How did they receive it? Is it something that you can see being expanded? Because it goes both ways, Chairman, it assists the farmers as well as it, you know, assists the population getting a healthy food choice.

Mr. Chairman: You have made a good plug for your Ministry there. PS.

Mr. Singh: [*Laughter*] Thanks, Chairman.

Ms. Johnson: Chairman, we are undertaking a study currently on our food support system. I do not want to pre-empt the results but I can—Mr. Gowrie here, our M&E Director could give us just a brief preliminary review on the feedback from that. The final report and the assessment of the data we have gathered over the past two months is not complete but he might be able to share a few insights briefly on that exercise.

Mr. Chairman: We will appreciate that. Please do.

Mr. Gowrie: Good morning, Chair. Good morning, members, colleagues. Just a review that we did on the food support, they were very happy for what we did so far for them. Many persons who are still unemployed appreciated the fact that they were accepted on the food grant and they are trying their best to become resilient by offering for the training courses that we offered them and also, they are trying to have their own gun in their homes so that they could suffice their food bill in addition to what we give them.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Thank you. I want to move to the Ministry of Labour which is extremely important in this enquiry and start by asking the Ministry to give us a sense of the overall impact of the pandemic on employment, underemployment, partial employment in Trinidad and Tobago. And I know the information may not be readily available but based on the data that you have so far, what can you tell us about the impact of the pandemic in the last 18 months, unemployment in the country?

Ms. Willis: So, Chairman, we would have gathered some information relative to what you are asking. In terms of—we would gather that information usually from the CSO and what I will do, I will ask the Head of Labour Market Information Unit to provide that response to you.

Mr. Spencer: Okay. Good morning to everybody. [*Inaudible*]—we have data up to the second quarter—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: For some reason—is it Mr. Reid or Mr. Raymond?

Ms. Willis: No, Mr. Bruce Spencer.

Mr. Spencer: Bruce Spencer.

Mr. Chairman: You are coming over extremely muffled so I do not know if it is the protocol—

Ms. Beckles: Well, Chair, I cannot hear him at all.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah. We are not hearing at all.

Mr. Spencer: You are hearing me now?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are hearing you better now, thank you.

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Mr. Spencer: It is probably because of the mask. What happened was that we were collecting data from the CSO up to the second quarter of 2020—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Sorry to interrupt you again.

Hon. Member: Chair, I cannot hear him.

Mr. Chairman: For some reason, he is not coming over clearly and we had the acting PS with her mask and she was clear so I do not know if it is a mike positioning issue but we are not hearing the gentleman at all clearly.

Hon. Member: Neither am I, Sir.

Mr. Spencer: [*Inaudible*]—are you hearing clearly?

Mr. Chairman: A little better, not great but go ahead, please.

Mr. Spencer: Okay. So probably I will speak a little loud. [*Inaudible*]—we would have collected data up to the second quarter of—[*Inaudible*]—which was March to June and—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Is there someone else who can give that information? Sorry about that, because we are not hearing you clearly at all. Or you may have to try taking off the video. It may be a bandwidth issue so try taking off the video and just use the mike and see if that works.

Mr. Spencer: [*Inaudible*]—so you are not hearing me properly still?

Ms. Beckles: No.

Mr. Chairman: What we will do is we will allow tech to try to sort out that and we move on to THA briefly because we are not hearing clearly there at all. Okay? So we are going to ask tech to see what we can do there. Apologies for that but let us move to the THA for the time being and we will come back to the Ministry of Labour. Okay?

So let us move to Mr. Elon Mayo. Good morning, again, Mr. Mayo, thank you for your patience. Give us a sense from the THA in Tobago's perspective of what the lay of the land has been in terms of the impact of the pandemic unemployment, underemployment, partial employment in Tobago? We know Tobago is largely driven by tourism and also the employment within the THA, but what else can you tell us about what you have been able to gather in terms of data on the impact of the pandemic?

Mr. Mayo: Good morning, everyone again. Within the aspect of the Tobago House of Assembly, what we have been seeing here from our Division, specifically, is that you have a level of

underemployment. The unfortunate aspect is that we have not been able to capture officially the data on underemployment in Tobago. From what the PS—it is the PS or DPS from Social Development said, it is true in that the aspects within Tobago that would have been affected would have been the domestic industry for the hotels, the guesthouses, the retailers and the construction industry for underemployment as well as unemployment. That is the lay of the land within that aspect within 2020 and partially 2021.

We have been able to—well, my Division has been able to provide some retooling and retraining aspects under the Community Development Department in assisting in retooling them with different skills from the vocational skill classes that we provide. With that, our department, Chair, the Labour Department, has been working tirelessly with our partner, the Ministry of Labour, in aspects of assisting persons in getting other jobs which they may have been retrenched, labour, in that manner. So that is the lay of the land when it comes to labour aspect and the—

Mr. Chairman: But given that Tobago is primarily—the economy is primarily driven by THA employment and the hotel, guesthouse, tourism industry and that has been shut down for the better part of over a year, what are the other jobs that you are referencing? And is it that Tobagonians had received any of the grants from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services/Finance, or the THA also providing some financial support and intervention for those who would have been affected?

Mr. Mayo: The THA would have provided some support to the business aspect of the businesses within Tobago. The other aspect of the personalized cheques, those applications would have been transferred across to Social Development and Family Services, but our Business Development Unit here would have took an active part in assisting businesses in Tobago in staying afloat to a certain level.

Ms. Beckles: Chair, could I ask whether he has the data as it relates to that? How many—

Mr. Chairman: I was going to ask that. But what were the eligibility criteria for the THA to provide those business support i.e. initiatives and how many were actually disbursed? What is the application level like and how many were actually disbursed, how many were rejected, et cetera?

Mr. Mayo: I can submit in writing the eligibility because I do not have that information on me currently. However, I was able to get information on specifics pertaining to particular grants. For example, I got information yesterday approximately 351 grants were disbursed, 293 were COVID grants to businesses and 28 were tourism grants, six were COVID loans and 30 were non-COVID

grants.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Thank you. Member Forde or member Singh or member Nakhid, do you have any questions for Mr. Mayo?

Ms. Beckles: Chair, I just wanted a follow up.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead. Please, go ahead.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. And that was based on the information that he indicated that was sent to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services I think. Could you give us what sort of numbers were sent in relation to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services?

Mr. Mayo: I can get that information for you and submit.

Ms. Beckles: Submit? Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Member Forde, member Nakhid, member Singh, any questions for Mr. Mayo? Mr. Mayo—

Mr. Nakhid: Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, member Nakhid.

Mr. Nakhid: Mr. Mayo, since you indicated about the underemployment and we know that Tobago, the economy, as Chairman said, it is from the THA and from tourism. I just want some clarity. You said that tourism grants were granted, 28 I think you said.

Mr. Mayo: Yes.

Mr. Nakhid: Who would qualify for a tourism grant, for example, just to be clear for those listening?

Mr. Chairman: And what is a tourism grant?

Mr. Nakhid: Exactly.

Mr. Mayo: I can get all that information for you and submit it to the Committee. However, I would not be able to say officially but that information is—*[Inaudible]*

Mr. Chairman: But you do not know what a tourism grant is?

Mr. Mayo: No. I know what it is but to say that the document is in front of me to give you an actual definition, I would not be able to.

Mr. Chairman: Well, just give us a sense of what you think a tourism grant is.

Mr. Mayo: Well, from what our Business Development Unit—*[Inaudible]*— it was the grant to help businesses within the tourism industry. For example, for the ones who do tours, the ones who do the water sports, those things like that—the industries that directly impact the tourism industry.

Mr. Chairman: And those went through the THA?

Mr. Mayo: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. You have another question?

Mr. Nakhid: Yes. And Mr. Mayo, not to belabour the point and you know it has nothing to do with you so it is not an attack. But given the industry that Tobago serves, would 28 tourism grants not be a very small amount?

Mr. Mayo: To be honest with you, I cannot give an opinion on that because I would not know the criteria, one, as well as I would not know how many businesses would have been accepted or rejected.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, Mr. Mayo.

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, member Forde.

Mr. Forde: Now, these business development grants that we are talking about, these tourism grants, now, this is separate and apart—you are hearing me, Chairman? You all are hearing me?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are hearing you. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Beckles: Yes, we are hearing you loud and clear.

Mr. Forde: Right. This is separate and apart of the subvention that would have been given by central government with regard to the tourism industry in Trinidad and Tobago. Clarify, please? Because remember, there was a separate figure that was supplied by the hon. Prime Minister and also the Ministry of Finance with regard to boosting the tourism industry during this COVID period. This is separate and apart from what Mr. Mayo is talking about?

Mr. Mayo: No, no, that tourism grant that was given out by THA was part of that because remember, you had the personal grant which was conducted by the Ministry of Finance and Social Development and then the Tobago House of Assembly through the Business Development Unit—I am not sure if NEDCO was part of that—were also giving out grants to businesses to help them stay afloat, help pay salaries and things like that. So there were two different grants: one was directed towards the tourism industry and the other one was directed towards the other retail private sector small businesses.

Mr. Forde: Right. So, Mr. Mayo, as of today, right, we are in November 2021, right, funds would have been allocated, funds would have been presented to those various entities that are involved in tourism. Is Tobago ready for an influx of tourists as we go forward into the Christmas season,

into 2022? What is the status? Give us a little feel as to what the climate is like because we are hearing Virgin Atlantic is supposed to start coming, we are hearing about the flights that are supposed to be coming in from Amsterdam and those places. Give us a little feel of what is happening in Tobago.

Mr. Mayo: Member Forde, if I give an opinion on that, that would be a personal opinion. It would not be an official opinion of the Tobago House of Assembly because the question that you asked me, I would not have the accurate information in hand because that information would be within another remit or another division, the Division of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Chairman: And that is a well-trained public servant there. Good response. [Laughter] Member Nakhid, go ahead, please.

Mr. Nakhid: Mr. Mayo, can you just give us an indication of the amount of those grants? How much would a tourism grant be, for example?

Mr. Mayo: I cannot give you the amount but what I can give you is the amount of the 28 grants that were given if permitted.

Mr. Chairman: The total? Please do.

Mr. Mayo: Yes, the total of the 28 grants were \$1,088,645.57.

Mr. Chairman: And can we presume that each of these grants will be equal?

Mr. Mayo: Pardon me?

Mr. Chairman: Can we presume that each of those grants would be an equal amount?

Mr. Mayo: Well, we cannot presume that I hope.

Mr. Chairman: So some are more based on what?

Mr. Mayo: As I said before, I would not know the criteria because as I said, based upon the business and the nature of the business, some businesses may need more than others. So I cannot give an official response on that. But I can give you—as I said, I just gave you the amount of the 28 tourism grants.

Mr. Chairman: In total. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Nakhid: Chairman, can we get in writing from Mr. Mayo—

Mr. Chairman: Yeah, I was going to ask if you could supply in writing the eligibility criteria and the breakdown of the 28 grants in terms of the 28 number. That should not be too difficult, that should fit on an Excel sheet.

Mr. Mayo: Yeah.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Mayo, we understand that this was pretty short notice for you so we appreciate your attempt to answer the question this morning.

Mr. Mayo: Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Can we go back to the Ministry of Labour? Are we ready for the Acting PS Willis and her team?

Ms. Willis: Yes, we are ready to response. Are you hearing us clearly?

Mr. Chairman: A little better, thank you.

Ms. Willis: So as I have indicated, we would have gotten data—

Mr. Nakhid: Chairman, we are not hearing her. We are not hearing her properly at all.

Mr. Chairman: We are still not hearing you, Acting PS Willis. I do not know if it is a technical issue on your microphone side there but it is quite cloudy and almost indecipherable. So I do not know if tech could continue working on that. All right? In the meantime, we can go back to the Ministry of Finance at this point and DPS.

DPS, based on what you have heard so far, can you give us a sense of—we asked the question already but I will expand it a bit—of if the Ministry plans to do some sort, in collaboration with possibly the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, national impact survey to give us a sense of where the vulnerability still lies? Because certainly, the response of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and other adjoining Ministries would have been in an emergency pandemic situation. The State is moving out of that now but certainly the impact will be felt way into past the SoE possibly lifting today and the recovery of the economic sectors in Trinidad and Tobago. So based on that, are there plans by the Ministry of Finance or the Ministry of Planning—well, you cannot answer for them, but the Ministry of Finance, to initiate some sort of impact survey nationally? DPS, Ministry of Finance?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes, Chairman. At this time, we do not have a plan per se but I am sure that it may come out of your recommendation and we will be happy to do so. And as you have said, having heard all that was discussed this morning, it would be appropriate for us to do so.

11.45 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: The hon. Minister of Finance has indicated, and I hope I am not misquoting, that the country has spent approximately \$5billion, in terms of intervention since the pandemic began. Is that the number?

Mr. Joseph: Yes, Chair. In the last fiscal year he would have indicated 200million, I believe,

additionally allocated in this fiscal year.

Mr. Chairman: Right. Can you give us a disaggregation of how much of that, what percentage of that or how much of that, went specifically to these Salary Relief Grants, social support grants in the context of the overall \$5billion figure, so the country gets a sense of how much direct intervention would have gone into people's day-to-day needs? Because I know a lot of it went also to rental grants and fuel grants, at some stage for maxi taxis and business grants. But certainly the day-to-day needs of citizens would have been some of the most pressing in the last 18 months in the tranches identified by your good selves earlier on. Sorry to put you on the spot there with that one.

Ms. Neemacharan: I do have some figures from our budget presentation, but I would prefer if we could send it to you in writing to be more appropriate and correct.

Mr. Chairman: In terms of the data collection from the Ministry, which is a question I asked the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services earlier on, is there a sense of the sectors that need more support looking forward for some sort of sustainable economic recovery, and also for social intervention. Because one of the things that the country realized is that even coming out of the lockdown measures, the private sector businesses that would have been impacted realized that just reopening did not necessarily mean people had disposable income to support those businesses. And they continue to be stymied by cash flow issues, et cetera. Because the man in the street, so to speak, generally, was still dealing with employment issues and underemployment issues. So is that part of where the Ministry is focusing, moving forward in terms of the recovery of the economy and sustainability?

Mr. Joseph: Well, Chair, as you are indicating, clearly some sectors would have experienced the negative impact of the pandemic to a much greater extent than other sectors. So, what you will find is a lot of the sectors will be in the wider services industry. So when you look at subsectors in the services industry, you know, immediately you could look at construction, the construction industry; industries, businesses that would be restaurants, bars, hotels and businesses involved in retail trade, you know. As you look through the services sector, you know, we can identify many niche areas, creative arts. So, indeed we would need to give this—

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead.

Mr. Joseph: Sorry, Chair. We would need to clearly give this further attention, with regard to having a survey conducted as well. Okay. So that we will be able to get some greater details on

the extent to which, you know, persons in the different sectors would have been impacted.

Mr. Chairman: I think, I mean, it certainly is a productive endeavor. Because at the end of the day, if the Ministry of Finance does not have a clear idea of what sectors had been impacted and how, it would certainly affect your ability to collect taxes from those sectors if the businesses and sectors were not performing well moving forward. Would that be unthinkable?

Mr. Joseph: That is correct, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah. All right. I think we have the—Thank you so much. The Ministry of Labour is back on another device. Acting PS Willis, are you with us again?

Ms. Willis: Yes I am.

Mr. Chairman: Much better. Thank you. We are hearing you loud and clear. Thank you so much. All right. If your colleague would answer the question we posed earlier on. I know he started but he was cloudy. So if he could restart the answering of that question we posed to him earlier on. Thank you. [*Technical difficulties*] I think you would have multiple devices on at the same time. That is why we are getting the feedback and the delay. So, if you have one device on, it may be helpful.

Mr. Spencer: So good morning everyone. Are you hearing me now?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are hearing you. Go ahead, please. And if they could turn the volume down on the device a bit, so we do not get the feedback and the delay. Thank you so much. But we are hearing you much better now.

Mr. Spencer: So, yes. So you are hearing us much better now, right?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, thank you. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Spencer: Okay. All right. What would have happened generally in the labour force, we only got up to the second quarter of 2020 from the CSO. So we did some analysis on that data. And that data would have been showing in general the labour force would have dropped, the persons with jobs would have dropped, and the total unemployed would have increased. Just to give you an idea of the figures, what has happened is that we look at the various quarters. We looked at the quarter for this year, the second quarter of 2020, in comparison to the second quarter of 2019. We do that because of the fact that we understand the unemployment structure within an economy is seasonal. Right? So when we looked at the second quarter of 2020, in comparison to that of 2019, we realized there was a fall in the labour force of 7,100 persons. Right? So we would have to do a little bit more investigation to give you the reason for that. But that probably may have been because some

people may have retired or some people may have left the labour force to attend to home duties because of the pandemic.

We also looked at the persons with jobs and we realized there was a fall of 11,700 persons. That is the same second quarter of 2020, in comparison to the second quarter of 2019. When we looked at the total unemployed, we saw an increase of 4,400 persons. Right? Just bear in mind actually it is the corresponding quarter, of the second quarter of 2020, to that of 2019.

When we looked at persons with jobs by industry, based on the fall as I told you before, which was 11,700, the majority of industries which we saw that that decreased in terms of persons with jobs, were in that of the manufacturing sector, the construction sector, and also what we call community and services, and also wholesale and retail. So just let me give you some figures. For instance in manufacturing, there was a fall in persons with jobs of 16,700 persons. That is about 37.7 per cent.

In terms of construction, there was a fall in persons with jobs of 12,100. That would be about 15.9 per cent. In wholesale and retail, there was a fall in terms of persons with jobs, of about 10,600 persons. That would have been about 10.1 per cent. And in terms of community and personnel services, there would have been a fall of probably about 4,700 persons or 2.2 per cent.

Now, that is in terms of industry. If you look at, in terms of type of worker—

Mr. Chairman: Just before you go on, is there a total on that there? Because my cursory calculation—I do not know if he is hearing me. Are you hearing me?

Ms. Neemacharan: Yes, we are.

Mr. Chairman: In terms of my cursory arithmetic there, that almost adds up to 100,000 jobs.

Mr. Spencer: Right. So what would have happened is that the figures we are looking at in the subindustries—there are some subindustries that would have increased in employment. So when you add up all of them, the final figure is what we would get, in terms of the total, which I told you before which was—

Mr. Chairman: So what is the net reduction, or the net gain, if that is the case?

Mr. Spencer: Right. So the net reduction was 11,700 persons with jobs.

Mr. Chairman: So there were job gains for about 60,000/70,000 people? Is that what you are saying?

Mr. Spencer: Yes, but I did not call out all the subs. What I am calling out is the major sectors that would have had a fall in persons with jobs.

Mr. Chairman: And when you say a fall in persons, you are talking about a reduction in jobs, right?

Mr. Spencer: Persons with jobs, yes.

Mr. Chairman: So, if you could just go over that again for us, please, for my—excuse me, for clarity, in terms of the sectors and the numbers of jobs that would have been lost or reduced, please.

Mr. Spencer: I can start from the beginning in terms of all the sectors. I was just going to give you the major sectors, but I can give you all the sectors.

Mr. Chairman: You could give us the major sectors.

Mr. Spencer: Huh?

Mr. Chairman: You can give us the major sectors.

Mr. Spencer: Okay. So what I will—for agriculture, there was an increase in terms of persons with jobs of 8,800 persons. Right? Within the petroleum sector, there would have been an increase of 4,300 persons. In terms of financing and insurance industry, there would have been an increase of 5,000 persons. That would have been the increases, the major increases during that particular period.

Now, the major decreases would have seen in manufacturing of 16,700 persons, as I said before. In construction, you would have seen a decrease of 12,100 persons. In wholesale and retail, we would have seen a decrease in 10,600 persons. And that would have been basically. So I gave you the major statistics for both the increases and decreases. Right?

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Thank you very much. So you have a clear sense, and this is comparison between 2019 second quarter and 2020 second quarter. That is your frame of reference. Okay?

Mr. Spencer: We must do it on a seasonal basis because you get a more accurate figure.

Mr. Chairman: All right. If I could go back—thank you so much, Sir. That is a great bit of data we got there. In terms of Ms. Willis, the Acting PS, had there been, from the Ministry of Labour, for the State sector because the public sector would generally have a reference from the State sector, of what the State would have put in place in terms of policy for employment deliverables, vis-à-vis work from home arrangements, hybrid arrangements which is part of the purview of this enquiry. Is there an official policy on that? Was there ever an official policy on that, and if so, what was that policy? What did it look like?

Ms. Willis: Okay. Thank you, Chair. So there is no official policy on work from home. The Industrial Relations Advisory Committee, which is a creature of the IRA and which was

established to provide guidance to the Minister of Labour on all matters related to industrial relations or labour matters, would have done a report coming out of which would have been guidelines to treat with remote work.

The Ministry of Planning and Development, I understand, has indicated that they are developing a policy with regard to work from home. The Ministry of Labour would have provided that Ministry with the guidelines developed by the IRAC and it should also be noted that the Occupational Safety and Health Agency would have also developed guidelines to treat with this issue as it is really—part of it is really a health and safety issue.

Mr. Chairman: So, what was the approach taken by various state agencies then, if there was no official policy and guidelines were issued? Is it that, based on the particular agency and their remit and their function, they would amend the guidelines to suit their needs?

Ms. Willis: Yes. The guidelines were to provide, well, as I said, to provide guidance to employers on how to treat with this issue of working from home in the absence of a policy.

Mr. Chairman: How much of this was done in collaboration with the trade union movement in Trinidad and Tobago?

Ms. Willis: Okay. Well, the composition of IRAC is multipartite. It comprises the trade union movement, employer organizations as well as government representatives and academia.

Mr. Chairman: Is there an ongoing process to reconcile this new reality we are in? Because, I mean, at the end of the day, we are—the State is moving back to opening up in a safe zone environment. But it still means that—the pandemic is still here. So it still means that there are still provisions that need to be put in place for one, health and safety of workers but two, productivity and deliverables. So I am—

Ms. Willis: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: So, I am not getting a sense that we are in a place where we are all on the same page. And I do not know if you can answer that question but that is my concern.

Ms. Willis: And I understand your concern, Chair. But we are committed at the Ministry to ensuring that all steps are taken to have these issues addressed, whether be it from an inter-ministerial committee established, or from one of our committees under the Ministry, whether it is IRAC, whether at the larger level of NTAC but we are committed to ensuring that this is done.

Mr. Chairman: What has been the biggest shock, based on the Industrial Court's revelations

about matters filed, what has been the biggest challenge or shock to the system for the IRA in Trinidad and Tobago and industrial relations in Trinidad and Tobago, given the effects of the pandemic? Because the cursory look at the data with matters filed in the Industrial Court suggests that a lot of resolutions have not taken place, where people feel they have no recourse but to head to the courts. Even interventions from the Ministry of Labour do not seem to have stymied that. Is the issue an absence of guidance, so people do not know what to do, so they were just pivoting to survive—

Ms. Willis: No.

Mr. Chairman: —without clear guidelines?

Ms. Willis: No, the Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy Division of the Ministry has been quite active in terms of having outreach in providing the information that is needed by members of the public, by employers, by employees, in terms of their rights and responsibilities. And they have instituted measures to allow persons access to this information. So they are quite active in going out and providing that information to members of the public.

Mr. Chairman: Member Singh, go ahead, please. Thank you.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to find out, as we are in relation to workers' rights as well as employers' rights, I want a simplified answer to employees, in terms of what employees can do, or rather what this Ministry of Labour can do, where employees realize that their employers are not paying, for example, things like their NIS contributions and things like that. I know you all have enforcement operations at the Ministry, but simplify it for the employees so that, state it step by step, what employees can do if they suspect that their employers are not paying their NIS contribution.

And I will just ask the second one, one time Mr. Chair, through you. What is the status, if any, with regard to the pandemic leave that we have heard about? Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Willis: Okay. Thank you, member Singh. With regard to your first question of what employees can do, well, the responsibility for payment of NIS is with the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago. And they would have a compliance officer at that organization to treat with this issue. But in terms of employees who are not receiving what they are entitled to, they can come to the Ministry and lodge complaints with our Labour Inspectorate Unit. They can also send, via email to the Labour Inspectorate at labour.inspector@gov.tt. They can call at 299-0300, with regard to speaking with either the Labour Inspectorate or the Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy

Division. They can also send emails to the conciliation.mol@gov.tt. In those instances, the officers at these divisions will respond and address their complaints and provide guidance as to what they need to do, as well as follow up with the relevant employer.

Mr. Chairman: Following that, Ms. Willis, your submissions stated that reports received by the Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy Division of the Ministry of Labour during the period March 2020 to September 2021, highlighted 115 reported disputes pursuant to the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act; 88 reports of trade disputes pertaining to layoffs and 1,019 reports of trade disputes concerning termination of service. Of these, how many of these disputes have been resolved and is the Ministry concerned about these figures which are in my estimation significant increases for corresponding periods the years before?

Ms. Willis: So thank you, Chair. Yes, the Ministry is concerned because it is clear that there is need for greater consultation with employer organizations in terms of how to treat with matters. And especially, it should be noted that, in terms of conciliation of matters, this is offered within 14 days. In some instances, parties are not able to meet within the specified period, and as such, an unresolved certificate of the dispute is issued.

Mr. Chairman: You are finished? Okay, also—

Ms. Willis: As I was indicating earlier, we need to have greater consultations, training, with the relevant employer organizations and unions. And this has been happening, but we have not as yet measured the impact of these interventions.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Forde and then member Nakhid.

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Madam Acting PS, Ms. Willis, in your submission you stated that the data-capture mechanism of the Labour Inspectorate Unit is currently being reviewed. Right. This is submission objective 1, question 7 on page 6 of your submission. And my questions to you are: What is the timeline for the completion of this review? And secondly, given that persons are returning to work, does the Ministry of Labour have a mechanism to monitor employment and unemployment trends post COVID-19 restrictions? Could you shed some light there, please?

Ms. Willis: Okay. So with regard to the first question, the data-capture system of the Labour Inspectorate system—

Mr. Chairman: Tell member Nakhid to ask questions—

Ms. Willis: Yes, it is being revised. What we are seeking to do also is digitalize the services of

that unit. So, it is all part of our digitalization strategy for the Ministry. We have received moneys under the Public Sector Investment Programme for this initiative and we are really in the embryonic stages of this.

Mr. Forde: Do we have a timeline?

Ms. Willis: With regard to—

Mr. Forde: A timeline for completion?

Ms. Willis: Excuse, member?

Mr. Forde: Are you able to give a timeline of the completion?

Ms. Willis: With regard to—the entire project is a three-year project.

Mr. Forde: Okay, okay.

Ms. Willis: But as I said, we are in the embryonic stages of this. Our IT unit would have done the relevant discussions, so we are developing the strategy coming out of those the discussions.

Mr. Forde: Okay. Additionally, are we in a position to have information, whether in a tabulated form or statistics, with regard to the number of man-hours, right, that during the Covid period—remember a decision was taken that public servants would be able to work from home. Are we able to tabulate the number of man-hours pertaining to the period from when we went on lock down to when we went back out? Because we would have had different periods of lock down. We would have had different times where individuals were in and out of work.

Are we able to have, in a tabulated form, the number of man-hours that that—what would have occurred there, and additionally do we have a cost factor associated with those number of man-hours? Because remember, we were made clear that no public servant lost salaries, right? They continue to have their salaries. So I would just like to know, in a tabulated form, you know, the number of man-hours, and then additionally, the cost to that man-hours. So that we are able to have an appreciation of the benefits that would have been extended to individuals during the COVID period. Over to you, Ms. Willis.

Ms. Willis: We would have to ask the relevant Ministries and departments to submit that information. We have not done so, but this is something I believe we may want to collaborate with the CPO on, as they are responsible for terms and conditions. So this is one aspect we would want to have that collaboration. But as of now, we do not have that information.

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman, I think that is pertinent information that would be good for this Committee. So again, I know the timeliness—

Madam Chairman: If they can supply it in writing.

Mr. Forde: If it can be supplied, yeah. Second—

Mr. Chairman: As well as the information her colleagues supplied earlier on. Member Nakhid, go ahead, please.

Mr. Nakhid: Hello, my first question would relate to your Ministry's submission that highlighted the voluntary initiatives implemented to combat the limitations of the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act. Are there any plans to amend the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act to make it compulsory for employers to report the termination of employment under a wider scope of circumstances?

Ms. Willis: In this—member, I will ask my Senior Legal Officer to respond to this as she has been part of the labor legislation reform project.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay.

Ms. Boondoo: Good morning, Chair. Good morning, members. Specifically, in response to your question, member Nakhid, at this point in time the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act only contains a provision for five or more retrenchments to be reported to the Minister of Labour. During the course of the pandemic, we realized that this was something that was an issue for us, and notwithstanding the legal provision, through the Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy Division, we would have issued a notice, an advisory to members of the public requesting that all retrenchments no matter the size, be reported to the Ministry to allow us to have that opportunity to collect the data.

In addition to that, we have been looking at the amendments to the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act. We are in the process of finalizing a policy in respect of that, however, the event of the pandemic has given us a data set and a set of issues that we would not have considered when we were originally looking at the retrenchment, that is, how do you manage retrenchment and the attendant issues during the times of crisis. So we are using the opportunity provided to us and the data and experiences collected by the Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy Division to assist in further refining the policy to take into consideration the lessons we have learned and continue to learn from the pandemic.

Mr. Nakhid: Would such an amendment, will, as it follows on, it will more accurately track unemployment trends. Would it not?

Ms. Boondoo: Member David, I must apologize. As part of the technical difficulties we are experiencing, we did not hear your entire question. Can you kindly repeat?

Mr. Nakhid: Okay, as a follow on to what the information that you proffered, such an amendment would help your Ministry of course, to more accurately track the unemployment trends which would be of invaluable service to the Government, I would imagine, correct?

Ms. Boondoo: Yes, to the Government and to the benefit of the citizens of this country. Yes.

Mr. Nakhid: Okay. I would like to ask you one more question. In your submission you stated that the Labour Inspectorate Unit of the MOL received 72 telephone calls and 20 in office meetings—visits during the period March 01, 2020 to July 31, 2021, pertaining to queries connected with issues such as changes in terms and conditions of employment, reduction in days and hours worked and reduction in salary. Given the increased public demand for advice on employment issues, has the Ministry of Labour sought to increase access to advisory services via the Labour Inspectorate Unit?

Ms. Boondoo: Yes, member Nakhid. During the time the Ministry of Labour recognized not only the additional and increased need for access to services, but we also recognized the difficulty that not being able to physically access our various offices because we have offices across the country that persons can access, the Labour Inspectorate and Conciliation Advisory and Advocacy Services. We did recognize the issues that would be faced by not being able to have physical contact. We had, in addition to having forms available—physical forms available at offices, we would have updated our contact information on the Ministry’s website and social media, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter on all of our social media handles to update the contact information. So we have various contact information available and the both of these divisions have separate emails, in addition to updating the Ministry’s website to put on the website contact form where persons can type in their issues for us there. And we have received complaints via our communications divisions, which would then be promptly forwarded on to Labour Inspectorate and Conciliation. And we do receive phone calls during the time, which we have and I have personally received a few—we do forward on to the relevant unit with the information for assistance to members of the public.

Mr. Nakhid: Given—thanks for all the information, quite detailed but just looking at the numbers, 72 telephone calls from March 1st to July 31st, in such a time seems quite a small amount of calls. Does it not? Is that because of the amount of workers you have available to process those calls or

what would the reason be? Because we have almost 200,000 people who have dropped out of the system. So, tell me—sorry, go on.

Ms. Boondoo: With respect to the data, it was for that specific period. What we can do is recognizing the issue that you have raised and the numbers that you have pointed out to us, we can review our data and submit—make a further submission in writing to provide a detailed answer. Because there would be—there may be data gaps that we may have missed and we would want to take the opportunity to rectify that given the question that you have raised. If that would be permitted.

Mr. Nakhid: Yes, of course. Thank you so much for your—

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely, thank you. Thank you, member Nakhid. We are trying to end at 12.30 because there is a sitting of the House of Representatives later on this afternoon and we want to include some wrap up comments from our guests but before we go, and I am going to put you on notice Ministry of Labour officials, we are going to invite you back because of the technical issues we had today, to more clearly enquire into your issues, so that is on record. And if you could supply the information that your colleague, Ms. Willis gave us earlier, including the numbers of the various sectors in full, in writing to the Secretariat, we would appreciate that greatly. But just before we go to your wrap ups, is there a system in place in the Ministry of Labour for disaggregating unemployment as opposed to under-employment, because in the context of COVID-19, while the reports may have been about job losses or terminations, I do not know if there is a mechanism to track loss of hours from 40 a week to 20 a week in the context of the impact on people because of the pandemic in the private sector.

Ms. Willis: So we—of course, CSO being the main collector of data, we would be reliant on the data provided by CSO in this regard. But once we receive that data, the Labour Market Information Unit would be the one to interrogate that data and do the analysis in terms of that aspect.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. At this time, I would like to invite—I think there is a question I was supposed to ask from a member of the audience. Okay. And does the Ministry collect unemployment data for T&T and how often, and where is this information published, if so? From a question from a member of the public.

Ms. Willis: I would asked the Head, Labour Market Information Unit to respond.

Mr. Spencer: Yes, yes, we do collect the unemployment rate data and we collect it from the CSO. It is done on a quarterly basis. And as I said, the last quarter we got was in the second quarter of

2020. But we have historical data going back as far as I think probably 1992, in terms of quarterly data. So, if anyone wants a series in terms of data, we can give them that and any data going forward, we also get it as well from the CSO and we have it stored in a database.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, thank you. I think it is your mask and you have a very thick mask that could be the problem—

Mr. Spencer: Okay, probably it is that, yes.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, but I understand the health protocols must be maintained. All right, at this time we would like to invite—

Mr. Forde: Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Forde: Is it possible I could just slip in one question and we could probably get the information in writing?

Mr. Chairman: If it is a short question, yes, member Forde.

Mr. Forde: It is with regard to the OJT programme, right, we know it caters for the graduates or individuals within the community between the ages of 8 to 35 years, which is a critical group in terms of, you know, coming out of school and seeking employment and so on, right? Question: what is the number of OJT trainees currently assigned to the public sector and private sector respectively, and it could be provided in writing because I presume it would be quite a number of information. And additionally: Based on the allocation that has been presented, based on the allocation identified, during the period 2020 to 2021, has the Ministry observed an increase in post-graduate degree holders seeking employment with regard to the OJT programme? Because as you know, the OJT programme may be a minimal salary, but I know individuals are seeking employment. So, I would just like to get a little synopsis on how the programme is operated, please, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Willis: Thank you, Chair, and just to make a correction, the programme targets persons aged 16 to 35—

Mr. Forde: 16, okay.

Ms. Willis: —16, yes, which is the official—the approved age for employment in Trinidad and Tobago. With regard to the—we will provide the information with regard to the number of persons currently employed, disaggregated as you have asked, unless Ms. David has that information that she can share now. No.

With regard to the question on the increasing number of graduates—would you, Ms. David, can you respond to that?

Ms. David: Good day, member.

Mr. Chairman: Good day.

Ms. David: And Committee, thanks for having us this morning. What I would say in terms of not having the exact figures to give you and we would provide in writing, yes, we have seen an increase in the number of applications coming for people would BSc's, but that I do not see as a bad thing because of the fact that the programme in itself is geared to providing them when they get their certification with an opportunity for job-ready skills through the On-the-Job Training Programme, which is the National Apprenticeship Programme. So, the budget allocation for this year would provide us with an opportunity to increase that number of persons that we could provide opportunity for. But that is also reliant on the increase in training providers coming on to the programme in order to be able to provide that critical opportunity that is necessary.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. At this time, I would like to invite DPS, Ministry of Finance for closing comments, please.

Ms. Neemacharan: Thank you, Chairman. The Ministry of Finance is happy and thank you for the opportunity to be involved in this discussion this morning. We also commit to providing and taking the necessary action where applicable in respect of the recommendation the Committee will provide after the enquiry. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Next, PS, Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, Ms. Johnson.

Ms. Johnson: Thank you, Chair. The discussion here has been enlightening. And I think we would have to take what is discussed here into consideration when we do our COVID Impact Assessment. They have already done the framework for that study in terms of the aims, purpose and methodology. We are aware that we will have to do a lot of triangulation of the data that is in the environment, so that we can get a better understanding and be able to prepare ourselves for similar events like this in the future. We are committed to sending the additional information shortly to the Committee to further its deliberations. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much for your time and contribution. Ms. Willis, Acting PS, Ministry of Labour.

Ms. Willis: Thank you, Chair. And just to express appreciation for being invited to this important discussion this morning, this important enquiry. We at the Ministry are committed to ensuring that the information requested is provided. We recognize that we would need to meet again and we look forward to the next occasion when we will need to continue the discussion. And we recognize also that we—there is need for greater collaboration among certain Ministries in respect of this issue and greater measurement of the impact of what we do.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, looking forward to having you again. And Mr. Mayo, Director of Labour, THA, Division of Community Development and Enterprise Development.

Mr. Mayo: Good afternoon, again. We here at our Division, we are grateful for this session. We also commit to giving the Committee the information that is requested and the information that is needed. We thank you for all your insights, and we are hopeful that the Tobago economy will get back up and would push forward especially within the tourism sector. We thank you again.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. We would like to thank all our stakeholders and those who would have been posting and commenting and sending questions on our Parliament social media platforms. On behalf of the Committee members, Mr. Forde, member Forde, member Beckles, and member Singh, and member Nakhid and members who could not be with us today, members, Monroe, Mohit and Sinanan, I am the Chairman Paul Richards, thank you all for being with us. And this meeting is now adjourned.

Mr. Forde: Good job, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Well, we have the next meeting for the 8th of December, so we will look forward to that and any comments you have, please send it to the Secretariat. Thank you all again and be safe.

12.30 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*

Appendix V – Verbatim Notes of 8th Meeting

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE EIGHTH VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE HELD (IN PUBLIC) ON WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 08, 2021, AT 10.25 A.M.

PRESENT

Mr. Paul Richards	Chairman
Mr. Esmond Forde	Vice-Chairman
Ms. Penelope Beckles	Member
Mr. Avinash Singh	Member
Mr. David Nakhid	Member
Ms. Vandana Mohit	Member
Mr. Julien Ogilvie	Secretary
Mr. Brian Lucio	Assistant Secretary
Ms. Aaneesa Baksh	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Nicole Brown	Graduate Research Assistant

ABSENT

Mr. Rohan Sinanan	Member
Mr. Roger Monroe	Member [<i>Excused</i>]

MINISTRY OF LABOUR

Ms. Natalie Willis	Permanent Secretary (Ag.)
Ms. Sengeeta Boondoo	Senior Legal Officer
Ms. Sabina Gomez	Chief Labour Relations Officer
Mr. Bruce Spencer	Head, Labour Market Information Unit

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO MANUFACTURERS' ASSOCIATION

Mr. George Naime	Director
Mr. Dale Parson	Director

BANKING INSURANCE AND GENERAL WORKERS UNION

Mr. Trevor Johnson	General Secretary
Mr. Jason Brown	2 nd Vice President

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO COALITION OF SERVICES LIMITED

Mr. Mark Edghill	President
Ms. Vashti G. Guyadeen	Chief Executive Officer

AVIATION COMMUNICATION AND ALLIED WORKERS UNION

Mr. Peter Farmer	Secretary General
Ms. Nadia Raphael	Member

AMALGAMATED WORKERS UNION

Mr. Michael Prentice	President General
Ms. Cassandra Tommy-Dabreo	General Secretary

Mr. Chairman: Welcome to the viewing and listening audience to this the Eighth Meeting of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration. This is the Committee's second hearing with stakeholders pursuant to its examination of unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the State's capacity to provide support to persons who became unemployed as a result of the pandemic. Members of the public are invited to submit their comments on the Parliament's social media platforms: YouTube, *ParlView* or via our Facebook and Twitter feeds.

At this point we would like to advise you of our stakeholders with us today including the Ministry of Labour, the Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union, the Amalgamated Workers Union, the Banking Insurance and General Workers Union, the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries, and the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association. At this point—I am the Chairman, Paul Richards, I would like to invite members of the Committee to please introduce themselves starting with member Beckles. Member Beckles?

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. The other member is Roger Monroe who is unable to be with us today. So we would like to identify that. All right. Thank you for joining us this morning again. We would like to invite also in a short while our stakeholders but to advise you at this time that this enquiry has four main objectives:

1. To examine the trends in unemployment in job losses in the private and public sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. To access the unemployment relief strategies and programmes of the State during the COVID-19 pandemic;

3. To examine the proposed strategies of the State to stimulate job creation and employment opportunities to counteract the adverse economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic; and
4. To examine the changes in the operations of the private sector aimed at sustaining business during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At this time, we would like to invite the heads of our stakeholder groups to please introduce themselves and their teams and also present a short two-minute opening comment and we will start with the Acting Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Labour, Ms. Natalie Willis.

Ms. Willis: Good morning, Chair, and esteemed members of the Committee. I am Natalie Willis, Acting Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour. With me this morning attending virtually is our head of our Labour Market Information Unit, Mr. Bruce Spencer; our Senior Legal Officer, Ms. Sengeeta Boondoo; and our Chief Labour Relations Officer, Ms. Sabina Gomez. Thank you Chair and esteemed Committee for this opportunity to appear before you yet again.

The Ministry of Labour is once again eager to have this privilege to engage with this Committee as well as the representatives of the public and stakeholders which the Ministry diligently serves by promoting decent work, equal opportunity and a stable industrial relations climate. The Ministry seeks meaningful and productive discussion on how it can continue to attend to the diverse needs and meet the evolving challenges of all our stakeholders in these trying times occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry remains committed to ensuring that its policies and procedures reflect the Government's people-centred concern for the well-being of the workforce and its role in maintaining the nation's economic stability.

The team logged on here today reflects multiple areas of expertise ranging from labour law, industrial relations and statistical analysis, as well as the years of experience in delivering the Ministry's mandate. We look forward to a fruitful discussion as we look into the effects of this terrible pandemic which has had on our small nation and in particular the labour issues and employability. I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Let us go now to the General Secretary of the Banking Insurance and General Workers Union, Mr. Trevor Johnson.

Mr. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Well, as indicated, I am the General Secretary of BIGWU—Banking Insurance and General Workers Union—and with me this morning is the union's Second Vice-President, comrade Jason Brown, who is very experienced in labour relations appearing in

matters before the Ministry of Labour and the Industrial Court and, of course, at bilateral levels with many of the employers where we have representation of the workers.

Our union is happy to be invited to this hearing this morning. Over the past year and a half or so during this unprecedented pandemic, we would have had to address many issues including that of some retrenchment in some of the areas where we represent workers. We would have had to deal with several industrial relation issues, some of which would have found their way either to the Ministry and/or to the Industrial Court. We would have had to address several of the issues that employers themselves would have been grappling with, the issue of vaccination in the workplace. Some workers would have willingly taken the vaccine, others for various reasons would have not, and we would have had to address that either way.

We would have also worked with the Joint Trade Union Movement and the other labour federations including the National Trade Union Centre and the Federation of Independent Trade Unions as we sought to get some level of cohesion in terms of the trade union's response to the pandemic and the employment issues that would have resulted there from. So just to conclude, BIGWU is happy to be here and in whatever way we could give responses and assist this hearing, we would be quite willing to do so. So thank you again, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Johnson. We move now to Mr. Peter Farmer, General Secretary or Secretary General, sorry, of the Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union. Mr. Farmer.

Mr. Farmer: Good morning, Chair. Good morning other members of the Committee and other participants. The JSC on Social Services and Public Administration has embarked from the initiative to examine employment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Government's capacity to provide support to those who became unemployed as a result. The Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union was identified by the Committee as a key stakeholder in the enquiry and we were asked to submit written responses, which we did, to a number of questions which the Committee thought it will be useful in their enquiry. The workers we represent are almost solely from the aviation industry and in particular, Caribbean Airlines Limited. Caribbean Airlines is a state enterprise and it forms a significant part of Government's machinery.

As a government-owned corporation, it therefore acts as an instrumentality or agency of Government on industrial policy and it is only because of the specifics or the specialities of the functions that CAL performs that they are not carried out by Government's public servants. It

follows, therefore, that because Government is acting through the instrumentality or agency of CAL that its officers should be subject to the same limitations that would be placed on Government officers. For instance, the Government cannot choose to exclude persons by discrimination.

We say all that because when it comes to a state enterprise, the question is not only whether Government had the capacity to support those who became unemployed but rather whether their formalities, instrumentalities or the agents of Government, that is the executive management and managers of the human resources departments, acted in a manner that demonstrated some sort of legal rectitude. For example, in the case of CAL when they chose rather than to implement a system of rotation to exclusively retain some workers and lay off others or while workers are on lay-off, advertise jobs publicly that fell within relative bargaining units. In the case of the Inflight Department alone, there were about 140 workers who were placed on unpaid lay-off for 12 months, while an equal number were kept on duty with salary cuts of 5 per cent. What is even more egregious is the fact that these laid-off workers, having applied for state relief, have not received any payments to date.

There are other alleged issues, some of which we have mentioned, that need to be looked at in detail. It will only augur well for your endeavour and hopefully to the long-term good of all by challenging the principals of state enterprises to reconsider the perception of themselves and their jobs. ACAWU wishes to suggest that this Committee facilitates a platform through which workers could anonymously, if they so wish, record their experiences with their employers. This we feel may be a good way of an capturing alternative snapshot of realities of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. It may not necessarily have to be part of this present exercise. We close our introductory remarks with words from Bhagwati from the Supreme Court of India where he said:

“(c) Where a corporation is an instrumentality or agency of Government it would be subject to...”—the same—“...constitutional or public...limitations as Government. The rule inhibiting arbitrary action...must apply equally...and it cannot act arbitrary... Its action must be in conformity with some principles which meets the test of reason and relevance.”

We thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr. Farmer. Quite a lot to digest there.

Mr. Farmer: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Certainly we can get into disaggregating that as our morning continues. Let us go

now to Mr. Michael Prentice, President General of the Amalgamated Workers Union. Mr. Prentice? Okay. We go then to Mr. Mark Edghill, President of the T&T Coalition of Services Industries. Mr. Edghill.

Mr. Edghill: Good morning, Chair and members. Thank you very much. I am Mark Edghill, President of the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries and the Association of Real Estate Agents of Trinidad and Tobago, and I am also accompanied this morning virtually by our CEO of the TTCSI, Ms. Vashti Guyadeen.

First and foremost, I would to thank you for including the TTCSI—the Coalition of Services Industries—in this discussion today. TTCSI was established in October 2006 as an umbrella organization that brings together all services, organizations and associations in Trinidad and Tobago. As an alliance of professional services, associations and organization, the TTCSI functions as a focal point to lobby, channel and address trade in services issues and services development issues which are critical for the sector to thrive in this competitive global environment and for the growth of sustainable services in the economy which contributed over 58 per cent in new GDP in 2018.

TTCSI has been recognized as the sole umbrella organization for services sector in the country and currently represents 56 member associations which together account for 650 members or approximately—sorry, 650,000 members which is approximately 50 per cent of our population. The majority of our members have been heavily impacted by the pandemic, hence the reason why we welcome this invitation to bring to the fore issues impacting service providers and firms in the country, and we look forward to bridging the gap between Government and the private sector. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Edghill. Let us go to Mr. George Naime, Director of the T&T Manufacturers' Association. Mr. Naime?

Mr. Naime: Morning. George Naime, Director of the TTMA, Chair of the Standing Committee for Trade, and thank you for inviting us today. My opening remarks are scripted. The TTMA wishes to thank Social Services and Public Administration for inviting members of the TTMA to attend this very important consultative process. TTMA has and continues to be a great advocate in moving our economy forward and we see this consultative process as a means towards that end moving, TT forward. TTMA has worked with the Government in a number of PPP-type arrangements, most notably the vaccinate to operate initiative where we assisted in getting over

40,000 jobs in the hands of willing and deserving persons from the business community. Further, the TTMA worked with the Government with regard to the roadmap to recovery where many recommendations were put forward not only to assist companies but their workers as well.

We are heartened that some considerations were given to the preservation of lives and livelihoods emanating from the roadmap to recovery recommendations. In this regard, we are here as practitioners from the business community to answer questions you may have on the way our economy, what worked optimally and what did not work optimally, what we think can or should be done to existing frameworks, and most importantly, what is needed to continue to place us along that path of normalcy. We are all striving for both our businesses and our most valued resource, our employees. Thank you again for this opportunity.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Naime. Mr. Prentice? Michael Prentice, President General of Amalgamated Workers Union, are you ready? Mr. Prentice? [*Pause*] Okay. We will have to come back to Mr. Prentice. All right. Thank you all so much for being with us. We would like to remind both Committee members and officials to direct their questions through me, the Chair, and the Chairman will also remind members to activate your microphone when you are called upon to make your contribution or when you would like to make a contribution. And if you have completed it, please turn it off and make sure that you are aware that you are on camera at any point. So be aware of your background, et cetera. Let us jump right into it. We have a couple members who would have to leave us in a short while. So let me go straight to member Beckles for the first round of questioning. Member Beckles, go ahead, please.

Ms. Beckles: Chair, so that bearing in mind that the President of the Amalgamated Workers is not here, should I still go ahead or—

Mr. Chairman: Yes. I did not realize that.

Ms. Beckles: Yes. So that means—

Mr. Chairman: You can go to the coalition services—the question—the other set of questions you have, please. Thank you.

Ms. Beckles: Just give me one minute.

Mr. Chairman: Yeah.

Ms. Beckles: So I would like to enquire whether the Ministry of Labour can indicate the reasons for the delay in the implementation of these policies? And, that is, the submission indicated that sectors most adversely affected by the employment terminations including arts, entertainment,

tourism, manufacturing and construction. Have there been any employment gains in the sectors that falls under your organization?

Mr. Chairman: Ministry of Labour.

Mr. Edghill: This is for the coalition, correct?

Ms. Beckles: Yes. Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, sorry. Coalition, sorry.

Mr. Edghill: Good morning, Minister. Thank you for your question as well. We have—one of the issues that we have had with respect to the grants and the unemployment situation has been the accessibility of the grants because a lot of operators are non-compliant based on the fact that they are single operators or small business owners. So they do not comply with all statutory requirements that have been stated as requirements to access grants or funding. That being one.

Of course, in terms of increases in labour, once the sectors have been reopened, people are getting back to work. However, some areas still have not been reopened, for example, the tour operators and parts of the tourism sector. This as a result is still impacting, you know, those sectors negatively and those individuals have not been able to access grants for the same reason, lack of compliance with statutory requirements. So that is an issue that we have been discussing and have raised with the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

We also have an issue or had an issue that we raised whereby the grants were made available to some sectors but not all, and I will give one instance with respect to pest control management, for example. Because they were considered an essential service their employees, when they were laid off or suspended from work, were not able to access salary grants because they were considered in the sector being essential. What happened is because businesses were closed, the business of the pest control sector was affected and therefore, the need for employment was not there. So they reduced their numbers of employees and as a result, those employees needed access to salary grants but were denied because the sector they worked in was considered essential. So that is an oversight of things that are going on that are creating problems with respect to assistance and aid for persons in the various sectors.

With respect to the tour operators as I mentioned, because you raised the arts and entertainment and tour operators and [*Inaudible*] and so on, there are sites in Trinidad that can be operated safely. The tour operators have established protocols that have been approved by CARPHA. They have the ability to operate safely by controlling numbers but again, we have been

trying to bridge the gap between them and Government so that they could understand that they are able to operate safely, to reopen and get back to work.

Mr. Chairman: Member Beckles, go ahead again, please.

Ms. Beckles: Yes. I just wanted to—can I ask a quick follow-up on that?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, absolutely.

Ms. Beckles: I just wanted to ask, maybe it might be a simply question, but what is your procedure for the application for the grants? Is it done online? Can it also be done in person? And do you find that you have a good response in terms of those who are accessing it?

Mr. Edghill: This is for me again, correct?

Ms. Beckles: Yes, please.

Mr. Edghill: Vashti, our CEO, can also step in when I am done, if you wish. The access, yes it can be done online and the feedback—one of the issues that I have heard is, for example, when the last lockdown was initiated, the first day of work or I should I say the last day of work would have been April the 29th. So the grant was stated to start from the following Monday if you were unemployed—if you lost your employment from the 1st of May. We had people who were—their last day of pay was the 29th of April. So when they put in their applications stating that their last working day was the 29th, they were denied salary grant because they did not lose their job on the 1st of May.

I mean that is something that is completely ridiculous because they were unemployed from that date. They did not become unemployed from that date. Okay? So we need some clarity and some corrective measures taken in that regard because a lot of people, because of that, were not able to access grants. The first tranche of grants from 2020, people did see their grants coming; 2021, however, I think less than 10 per cent of people who have applied have received their grants.

Mr. Chairman: Member Beckles, you have a follow-up before we go to member Nakhid?

Ms. Beckles: No, I do not have a follow-up.

Mr. Chairman: Member Nakhid, go ahead, please. Member Nakhid, go ahead, please.

Mr. Nakhid: Mr. Edghill, good morning.

Mr. Edghill: Good morning, Sir.

Mr. Nakhid: You addressed two oversights—well, one is an oversight and one probably something that sounds like a nightmare, but what solution did you all attempt to provide for these workers? What happened? What was the procedure when you realized that this oversight was

happening? What did you all do then to find the solution?

Mr. Edghill: So again, one of the first things we did was make it known to Ministry of Trade and Industry, which is our line Ministry. What we do need to understand is that we do not have the ability to give relief to these people through our association but we have to link them with the right institutions to do so. So we are the link in the information to get things sorted out for them but they have not been able to receive relief in that regard. The other thing, or should I say, the main approach that the TTCSI took to try and alleviate the situation was to work with people who were not compliant, to educate them and assist them in building structure for their organization or their business so that they can become complaint with regard to what the requirements were for applying for these grants because they were denied. They were not meeting the requirements so obviously they needed to understand what was required of them and steps they needed to take to become compliant.

Mr. Nakhid: And a final question, Chairman. Do you have any idea how many workers, given these two oversights that you mentioned, how many workers were directly affected approximately?

Mr. Edghill: That—let me bring in my CEO, Vashti Guyadeen, who handles who statistics and data collection. She may have that information.

Mr. Chairman: Ms. Guyadeen, go ahead, please.

Ms. Guyadeen: Thank you, Chair. Chair, we are in the process. The reports that we submitted, these reports were completed during the period May 2020. On the request for this Committee, we are in the process of compiling new data and I am sure you appreciate that stipulation is flexible. It is fluid. So if we look at the tourism sector, roughly 75 per cent of those businesses have been closed. So on a subsector level, we will be able to supply that data by the end of this year to the Committee.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Just before I go to member Mohit for questions to the coalition—and could Mr. Prentice standby, please—Chairman, your President indicated—Director, sorry, that you represent about 650,000 persons in the services sector.

Mr. Edghill: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Could you give us a sense, even from your initial assessment, what percentage of that would have been affected by unemployment even though some may have started resuming their employment when the country reopened a couple weeks ago?

Mr. Edghill: Again, I think the best person to answer that would be the CEO Guyadeen.

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely, not a problem.

Mr. Edghill: She is our numbers expert.

Mr. Chairman: And I am glad you brought her. Ms. Guyadeen.

10.55 a.m.

Ms. Guyadeen: Sure. Chair, so let me just break down. We broke down the sectors in terms of the sectors that were facing stay-at-home work orders and the vulnerable sectors. So this is arts, entertainment, recreational services or we looped them into the cultural and creative sector, roughly 75 per cent of that sector has been impacted. Sport services, personal care, between the period of the first stay-at-home work order from March 31, 2020 to this year, they were out of commission. They have now been able to resume operations. Day care services are currently closed. Tourism services again, roughly 75 to 85 per cent have been impacted. Those total numbers, we will have for the Committee by the end of this year.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much. Just before I go to member Mohit, Mr. Prentice, can you do your introduction, please? Mr. Michael Prentice, President General of the Amalgamated Workers Union. Go ahead, please. Mr. Prentice?

Mr. Prentice: [*Technical difficulties*]—Workers Unions. Good morning.

Mr. Chairman: We are hearing you, go ahead, please.

Mr. Prentice: Okay. Good morning. President General, Michael Prentice of the Amalgamated Workers Union. At this time, I want to sincerely apologize in the first instance for my General Secretary who at this time is unable to log in because her computer went down this morning. Nevertheless, I just want to point out the fact that as the Amalgamated Workers Union, we represent workers in a number of industries, both private and public sector. The Bermudez Biscuit Company Limited. We also represent workers at the Royal Castle group of companies. We also represent workers in the Port of Spain Corporation and inside of New City Mall.

We would have challenges during this time. Fortunately, in some areas, the public sector workers were not affected in a huge way as it would have affected workers in the private sector. The private sector would have been hit extremely hard but we were able to have communication in the corporation and so, discussing the challenges that were facing the workers in that industry. In the Bermudez sector, we would have also had a number of challenges there that would have brought forward and created issues and challenges for all of us.

At this juncture, I am saying that as it relates to the Royal Castle workers, what the union would have done in order to assist in cushioning some of the challenges that we would have faced there is to suspend our union dues and things like that in order to assist the workers in that industry. Because the workers in that industry would have sourced to get benefits, some of what was provided by the State in terms of food cards and hampers and so on in that industry and they would have faced a number of challenges.

We are extremely thankful at this time to be invited to this meeting today and we hope that we would be able to make some measure of contribution as it relates to the challenges that we are now facing—[*Technical difficulties*—unprecedented situation for all of us, first time facing this and I hope today we will be able to make some contribution in this regard. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr. Prentice. Just before I go to member Mohit for questions following up for the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition of Services Industries, can Mr. Edghill or Ms. Guyadeen identify what percentage of your membership—and it may come in the document that you present at the end of the year—that would have faced challenges receiving support due to compliance issues? Ms. Guyadeen.

Ms. Guyadeen: Chair, sure. I cannot quantify the numbers because I am a researcher so I like to be precise. But again, I would have to go back to the sectors that have been contacting us and that is the cultural and creative industries. And I am a person who likes to see that there is a silver lining in everything and the silver lining for the pandemic for the cultural and creative industries is that most of these operators are seeing the need to become compliant and register their businesses.

Mr. Chairman: So from the coalition's perspective, do you see that there had been a serious gap before in terms of them understanding those compliance requirements as part of a going concern of business in the framework of Trinidad and Tobago, not only to receive grants because that part of it, but just being part of operating a business properly in this sort of framework and being formalized in the space so to speak?

Ms. Guyadeen: Chair, that has indeed been the situation where they are reaching out to us to assist them in becoming registered and it is not just for grants. I wish to add going back to member Beckles' question. Most of our members, they are not just looking at grants, they are not looking for a handout but they are looking for strategies to build back better and I will give you an example of the tourism operators. What they have put forward to us is that they want to plan a

comprehensive staycation campaign and that staycation campaign must involve a virtual element. So it is not just getting the protocols in place for domestic tourism but as well as marketing of—if you have a virtual campaign, you can also market our services and products for an international market so that we can attract new visitors to the destination when we do open back.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Mohit, go ahead, please.

Mr. Edghill: Chair, if I can add quickly? Apologies.

Mr. Chairman: Please, no go ahead and then member Mohit. Go ahead, please, Mr. Edghill.

Mr. Edghill: What I can add to that is one of the reasons why staycation tourism is one of the things that needs to be addressed. It is an opportunity that the cooperatives, for example, are looking at for preparation for international visitors. So to put the protocols into use now so that any glitches or hiccups can be addressed prior to the reopening of the larger international tourism market.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Mohit, go ahead, please.

Ms. Mohit: Chair, may I ask? Are we in coalition?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chair, I would just like to direct a question on whether there have been any employment gains in the sector that fall under the organization, TTCSI, in terms of those who were adversely affected by employment termination such as entertainment, tourism, manufacturing and construction.

Mr. Edghill: Good morning, member. Firstly—[*Technical difficulties*]
—again, that Vashti will assist with some of the—[*Technical difficulties*]
—information there. What I can say is that some of the sectors that saw gains would have been the IT and online-type businesses. We have seen the pivoting of many other service businesses through an online presence as well, so the increase or employment in that area has been a focus of growth. Reason being, people that may have been in other positions would have to transitioned into operating in a role that would have been geared towards the doing of business online for that particular sector. I think, Vashti, if you want to jump in with what statistics you have on the increase since the reopening?

Ms. Guyadeen: Sure. Thank you, President. Chair, we have seen—one of the sectors that have been able to flourish during this period is the business and professional services and this has been a sector that comprises of consultants, IT professionals, architects. It is a full gambit of professional services and this sector has been able—these persons have been able to utilize technology to bid

for international projects. So whereby we had consultants telling us pre-COVID, they would have been able to bid for one contract which means that they had to travel. Now they are able to get four to five projects per annum.

Secondly, in terms of the business and professional services, what TTCSI has done, the sectors who have demonstrated that they are going to focus on new markets, earlier this year, September 3rd to be precise, we launched our Go Global TT Services campaign. So those sectors that have the ability to win new markets under the GATEWAY to Trade programme, we are putting them through a rigorous nine-month programme whereby we are assisting them in the development of their export plan in terms of marketing, website development as well as export. We are collaborating with exporTT to do the market connections for these firms. We are targeting 80 firms in the first instance.

Mr. Chairman: Member Mohit, you have a follow-up? Member Mohit, do you have a follow-up? Member Forde, your hand is up. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Chairman. Good morning again to our panel out there. My question this morning really hinges around—again it is a question, Chairman, that when each particular representative from the various entities we have there are given the opportunity to speak, you know, I would like to hear from them basically what have they done as a trade union, as a coalition, as a grouping for their membership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Right? Starting with Mr. Edghill who we basically have heard from. Right? We heard that there were some relief situations. Right? He mentioned he has about 600 persons in his membership and 75 per cent of them would have been impacted.

But my question is to Mr. Edghill and also, well, his CEO there, Ms Guyadeen, is as a group, as an entity, as a coalition, what have you all done in order to assist the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in putting out and assisting your membership during this period of pandemic? You know, we heard that you all spoke about, yes, the salary relief grants, the NAMDEVCO hampers, the food cards, all the various things that the Government would have put out, all the banking loans being subsidized and so on by the Government. I would like to know what you all have done in order to assist the Government during this period of pandemic.

And, Mr. Chairman, at least this question also can go for all the participants when they have their turn to say something. Thank you.

Mr. Edghill: Thank you, member. So, Chair, can I go ahead?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, please go ahead.

Mr. Edghill: Okay. So the TTCSI, as I mentioned, was a point of contact for lobbying the Government and assisting Government in getting information back to our membership. The TTCSI was involved with the American Chamber and the TT Chamber with the vaccination drive at NAPA. We have the consultations with many of our members. We have had roundtable discussions with our Presidents of the Associations that we represent to identify where they were having difficulties—*[Interruption]*—sorry, and all that information was compiled and supplied or furnished to the Ministry of Trade and Industry. So the transfer of information was our main point of contact obviously because we cannot provide funding for relief so we have to provide the guidance and the service to assist them in not only becoming compliant to access the available options that they have but also one of the main focuses that we have had was lobbying for Government to prove certain sectors can actually get back to work, that sectors have protocols established, that protocols have been approved by the Minister in the Ministry of Health and CARPHA and we are still in that trend. We are still in that phase. Right now we are actually focused on the tourism sector for that reason. We have dealt with the yacht services sector, we have dealt with the real estate sector as well, all of which have protocols established to operate safely and we have been able to get them reopened.

So the TTCSI has been very active. I mean, I would say that—I mean, I took up the position in April of this year and it was not supposed to be a very demanding job but because of the lockdowns and the pandemic, it has been practically a full-time job because of the amount of activity in working with our membership and trying to facilitate the assistance that our membership is looking for, just for them to get back to work so they can survive.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Just before we go to the Banking Insurance and General Workers Union, I know member—

Mr. Forde: Chairman, before you go, just a little follow-up. One little follow-up. Quick question to Mr. Edghill. His membership, do they pay a subscription fee or anything towards the coalition?

Mr. Edghill: Right. We collect a very small pittance from our member associations. So we do not benefit from the 650,000 individuals, we benefit from the associations that they are members of. So the 58 member associations that we represent, they each pay \$900 a month. So it is not a significant amount and we do need a lot more to do the work that we have been doing to actually facilitate better growth in the sector and we are doing everything we can right now to justify that

also. Ms. Guyadeen can also jump in with some additional information.

Mr. Forde: Thank you.

Ms. Guyadeen: Chair, if I can just correct that? It is 900 per annum.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Thank you. Just before we—

Ms. Guyadeen: And Chair, if I could just add to—

Mr. Chairman: I am going to ask you to hold that, Ms Guyadeen, for a second because we really want to get through to some of the other groups effectively in terms of time management, so we may come back to that.

But before we go to the Banking Insurance and General Workers Union, I know member Mohit had a question and then we will go to member Singh for his question to the Banking Insurance and General Workers Union. So member Mohit, your final question for the coalition and then we go to member Singh.

Ms. Mohit: Sure. Thank you, Chairman. Can we have some light placed on or “shedded” when it comes to vaccination policy for the TTCSI?

Mr. Edghill: So I will let Vashti deal with that and in terms of what—Vashti, you are hearing me?

Mr. Chairman: Ms. Guyadeen, go ahead, please.

Ms. Guyadeen: President, about vaccination, I know that this is your area of expertise.

Mr. Edghill: All right. I have to go back to that then. We have been in support of—when coming to vaccination and policies, the membership has been split pretty much down the middle in terms of those for vaccine mandates and those against vaccine mandate. So with regard to the policy, we are in support of what the TT Chamber, AMCHAM, all of these other organizations have come together, the Joint Chambers, the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, et cetera, in terms of looking for the formulation of a working industrial relations policy for the vaccination.

So I believe—I mean, in my personal opinion, I believe the vaccination requirements will differ based on the type of operations, so it is something that will need to be looked at by sector and by specific business operations. So there are areas that it may be required to be mandatory because of the significance or the type of work environment, whereas there are others that may not. So I think it is something that needs to be looked at carefully and not something can be dealt with in terms of putting a blanket decision across.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Edghill, thanks. Just to the Acting Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Labour, Ms. Willis, what is the progress status on the draft workplace vaccination policy from the

Ministry if there is one? And then we will go to member Singh for the Banking Insurance and General Workers Union. So Acting PS Willis, is there a draft policy on the way?

Ms. Willis: A draft paper on a possible vaccination policy would have been developed by the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee which is a committee established under the Industrial Relations Act and provides guidance to the Minister of Labour. That committee which is multipartite in nature would have looked at the issue and prepared a paper and guidelines and those two papers or two those documents are before Cabinet at this time.

Mr. Chairman: Is there a framework you can share with us?

Ms. Willis: I will ask my Senior Legal Officer who is also a member of the Industrial Relations Advisory Committee to indicate whether there is such.

Mr. Chairman: And a general approach. Thank you so much. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Willis: Ms. Boondoo.

Ms. Boondoo: Thank you, PS. Good morning, Chair and members of the Committee. At this point in time, the framework includes consultations with workers and employer organizations in respect of how any such policy with respect to vaccination would affect not only the workplaces and their operational requirements but also with respect to enforcement of any such policy and the role of employers and trade unions in supporting the enforcement of any such policy should it come to light. So that is the framework that we have utilized in keeping with our typical practices on the development of policy. It is intended that once Cabinet gives us a directive in terms of how we are to move forward, our stakeholders, not just trade unions and employers, but our multipartite stakeholders would also be given an opportunity to provide comments and guidance and qualitative and quantitative information where they can to assist us in finalizing that document.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Is part of the consideration—just before we go to Mr. Peter Farmer, Ms. Boondoo, part of a conversation on the employers' responsibility to ensure a safe workplace in the context of COVID-19 and vaccination is part of that the framework consideration and how the OSH Act may have to inform that?

Ms. Boondoo: Yes, Mr. Chair, that is in fact an important consideration, treatment of the coronavirus as a workplace safety and health issue. The relevant provisions under the OSH Act were examined, not only with respect to the employers' obligations and responsibility, but the employees and the context in which the refusal to work right may be exercised in such a situation.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Mr. Farmer and then member Singh. Mr. Farmer.

Mr. Farmer: This question is for Mr. Edghill and I was wondering if Caribbean Airlines happens to be a member of his organization and as a matter of fact, if any of the other airlines have contacted him or his organization with respect to synergies that may be developed so that they can get people back to work and also the airlines providing travellers and so on in delivering to his members? I would like to know if there has been any sort of connection there?

Mr. Edghill: Thank you for your question.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Mr. Edghill: So to answer the question, to my knowledge, no. However, it is very coincidental that not only are you asking the question but that you are in this meeting this morning as well because we have been going through an exercise identifying what organizations are in existence in the country, what sectors are not currently properly represented by a structured association and one of the associations or groups and sectors that I had asked my CEO to actually look into for us to engage is the aviation services sector. So it is something that we are looking at. We have not gotten there yet. We are actually dealing with a lot of issues on the side of getting people back to work still but definitely aviation is one of the areas that we do need to look at because I think that there are lot of opportunities there.

In terms of Caribbean Airlines collaboration, we have not had anything as yet but we are open to discussions obviously. So I hope that answers your question and I hope that it opens the door for us to actually have some more collaboration going forward.

Mr. Chairman: I can see that we are going to have a lot more interface with the coalition sector moving forward. Let us go to the Banking Insurance and General Workers Union. Member Singh, go ahead please and then member Forde.

Mr. Singh: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like to pose two questions to the Banking Insurance and General Workers Union, if I may? The first question to BIGWU is: Is your union satisfied with the policy proposals, guidelines and advisory services that are being provided by the Ministry of Labour to stakeholders? And this really in response to the unique industrial relation issues generated from COVID-19. Should I also pose the second question, Mr. Chair, one time?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, please.

Mr. Singh: Right. And the second question to BIGWU would be, I saw that you have indicated that BIGWU met with employers and other stakeholders to make recommendations and to seek clarification given that this pandemic has affected the country and, you know, members in an

unprecedented way. I would like to know if you can identify some of these recommendations that emerged from those meetings. So over to you, Chair. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, please, officials from BIGWU. Mr. Johnson.

Mr. Johnson: Yes, Chair. Let me, perhaps, what is in my memory in terms of the second question in particular and I will ask my colleague comrade Jason Brown to also assist with part of the first question which I think had to do with are we satisfied with what is coming out of the Ministry of Labour in terms of guidelines, et cetera, to assist us.

With respect to the—so I am just taking the second question first in terms of meeting with stakeholders, et cetera. That has not been so much an individual exercise with our union alone but we have teamed up with, for example, the Joint Trade Union Movement. We are an affiliate of the Joint Trade Union Movement and the Joint Trade Union Movement together as well has been working with the other trade union federations, so that is the National Trade Union Centre and the Federation of Independent Trade Unions.

So, yes—because the trade union movement as far as possible, in order to create some synergies, have tried to see if we can operate as a team. We have met, for example, with the Joint Chambers of Commerce. That would have been a couple of months ago when we were looking at this whole issue of—when this issue of the vaccination in the workplace—mandatory vaccinations was becoming a sort of topical discussion. And we would have met with the Chambers in order to see if we can, first of all, put our position forward and also to see if we can work with them in terms of to get to some position where we can have businesses reopened, et cetera. So we did have one meeting with them. That meeting was actually facilitated by the Cipriani College of Labour and Co-operative Studies and other key stakeholders in this process. And we would have also met with, for example, the Employers Consultative Association also to see whether we can have some sort of synergies of understanding. Because of the unprecedented nature of this pandemic, it is fair to say that these organizations—the Chambers of Commerce, the Employers Consultative body and ourselves, of course, would have differed on several areas but we felt it was necessary to put those differences aside and try to see where we can have common ground.

One of the areas of common ground at the time was that the parties agreed that mandatory workplace vaccination was not at the time the way to go. The strong focus would have been on, for example, looking at how we could enforce protocols in the workplace, you know, the typical things being advised by the Ministry of Health, et cetera. We would have also looked to see what

areas the parties can come together with. So, for example, BIGWU has been able to stave off areas where there was going to be retrenchment and we have been able to work with or have dialogue with the employers to try to keep that at a minimal. So we have not had a significant amount of retrenchment in the areas where we represent workers which is over 80 organizations in Trinidad and Tobago.

There have been some but I think as a result of dialogue and discussion with the various employers, we have, for now, been able to keep that at bay and that was one of the key areas in terms of our objective in terms of keeping people on the job or keeping people in work so to speak.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Johnson, if I can just interrupt you just to get some clarity. Two issues. One, the issue of retrenchment or furlough and then the issue of the mandatory vaccination. Is it part of the challenge that you and maybe other unions are facing is—for example, with your union, you represent such a wide cross section of sectors. You represent banking, media, retailing supermarkets, regulatory and energy.

11.25 a.m.

And to me, it seems counterintuitive to think that all these sectors can benefit from the same policy decision or the same approaches. One, some may argue the financial sector did not necessarily suffer financially during the pandemic. Some financial sector organizations made more money because, well, people went online and had to get a lot more stuff online. So they did not necessarily—they had to pivot but they did not financially suffer.

Media contracted. I am a member of the media. I know many media houses contracted because advertising went down, retail went down. When retail goes down, advertising goes down. So it is part of the challenge as a union, and this may be evident in other unions, trying to have a one plaster for everything, when different sectors may require different approaches even under the same umbrella union. And what were your recommendations coming out of that sort of experience?

Mr. Johnson: Okay. Yes, the observations you have made, Chair, are fairly correct. For example, the banking sector—and it is of obvious, it is public—they continue to make a fair amount of profit. So they have not been impacted, so we have not really had retrenchment in that sector, per se.

Mr. Chairman: But that does not mean that the employees in some sectors were not more exposed because operations continued and they had to interface, for example, in Tru Valu Supermarkets,

in the banking sector, with the general public, exposing them more to possible COVID exposure. So there are different scenarios with different sectors.

Mr. Johnson: Yes, that is correct and we have had to—yes, it was not a matter of a one-size or one plaster fits all for the record because we had key challenges in areas like the retail sector, Tru Valu Supermarket. We have had to have many interventions there because part of the challenge of this COVID engagement we have had is where you have employers trying to implement what they consider to be solutions but without necessarily seeking to engage either the workers or the trade union. And we have had to have many interventions, whether it was employers seeking to change hours of work or change some sort of operational policy which would have impacted the workers in the workplace.

So, what I would like to do is also, if I could just be permitted to have my colleague, comrade Jason Brown just step in a bit and share a perspective on the two questions asked.

Mr. Chairman: Absolutely. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Brown: Good morning everyone and thank you, Chair. Just to add to the last contribution made by comrade Johnson. Yes, there can be different solutions for—based on uniqueness of certain companies. But the union was able, as a body, as a representative body, to send out guidelines to all 75 or more of our branches regarding the generic things; regarding how it is you are to operate during the pandemic; the health hazards; when the vaccinations came out, what were your rights and what were your responsibilities; things that you should do to contact the union. And after having guided them on those broad perspectives, what we would have sought to do was to meet with the employees, to meet with the members, to determine what were the unique issues that they were having based on the particular sectors that they were in and then go to those particular sectors and meet with the employers to represent them specifically to try to resolve those issues.

To deal with the first question, I believe, that was raised regarding satisfaction, regarding guidance coming out of the Ministry of Labour, I prefer not to deal with it in terms of satisfactory or unsatisfactory but to report objectively as to what had happened. When the pandemic emerged in March of 2020, the term “pandemic leave” was a broad term that was being used regularly and the population absorbed it. But when it was absorbed by the population, no further guidance came out as to how it was supposed to be administered. And what you had were employees and employers involved in basically a tailspin as to how to administrate this thing because you were

having people with different issues. Were you a primary contact? Were you a secondary contact? Were you symptomatic but not necessarily tested positive? And therefore, you had to juxtapose pandemic leave against all the other types of leave that you have in the collective agreements, which is vacation leave, sick leave, uncertified or certified. And then—

Mr. Chairman: But just for clarity, the term “pandemic leave” was first, if my memory serves me correct, propagated by then Minister of Labour, Jennifer Baptiste-Primus and shut down publicly by the Prime Minister. So was it ever an official classification of leave, although it was being bandied about in the public narrative?

Mr. Brown: Well, this is the issue because by the time it was birthed to the time it was shut down, it was a sufficient time to create an expectation from workers that, “Listen, a new category of leave could be reasonably created to accommodate these situations that were caused by the pandemic.” Like I said, the different levels of expose and so. And therefore, what it caused to happen after was to begin another set of negotiations between the union and the companies that we have recognized majority for to now apply what was in the collective agreement creatively to allow people to get paid. Because remember at that point in time, the mandate was the protection of lives and livelihood, in that order. So while it is people had to stay at home, people also had to sustain themselves and their families economically. And you had challenges with the union trying to ensure that these people could stay at home but still remain paid. Because some employers were looking at it from a perspective, “Fine, you can say home but we are not going to pay you, and that was a challenge.”

And then, subsequent to that, there was the statement, to use your phrase, “bandied about”, vaccinate to operate, just around the time that the vaccinations were available. And then, without that guideline that you would have—someone would have asked about it, I believe it was you, Chair, as to the status as to where that is right now, in terms of being available for public consumption and guidance. When that came about, you had an issue now where people—large employers, the largest bank in the country, using that and other issues only known to them at this point in time, unilaterally taking decisions where it was you have to be vaccinated to continue to work in their employ and if not, you are going to have to provide them with a PCR test at your expense, which really is unaffordable by these workers.

So, in the absence—all that to say, in the absence of this policy that you have just asked about from the Ministry of Labour, the trade unions are left to start from scratch with collective

bargaining—

Mr. Chairman: But can you guide—and the other unions can also advice on this—were there consultations with the majority representative unions on these kinds of decisions to changes in terms and conditions, even though everyone was pivoting in emergency mode? Because these—I would use the word “imposition” loosely. Because in many cases it was a mandate from the company to the employees, started, one, encouraging or in some instances forcing employees to use their vacation and/or casual leave to take up when they were either on quarantine for exposure or not, and using up that time and then not having an option for whatever this pandemic leave situation was, in terms of how their terms and contracts were affected by the employer.

Mr. Brown: Well, you see, consultation has a meaning and what I would want people to understand, unfortunately, is that some employers use consultation in a very cosmetic sense. I can call you in the morning and tell that you that I want to discuss something with you and after having discussed something with you, as in one case on the 6th of August, 2021, implement it 10 days later, without having any further discussion and/or agreement with you as to how this thing is going to impact the workforce and how it is going to raise the level of anxiety that is already existing because of the pandemic. And it has caused no end of woes for many workers in the banking sector and in the financial services sector because it is not only banking, it has been happening in credit unions as well.

So you can speak about consultation. And the Industrial Relations Act, under section 40, speaks of good faith bargaining but, you see, that has to be qualified. Consultation means a give and a take, an understanding and a reasonable acceptance of what parties have to say and exchange on a table. But if it does not happen, then it is unilateral. But then you argue, “Well then I had a meeting with the union and therefore that satisfies as consultation.” The union is not interested in the cosmetics. The union is interested in meaningful consultation. And when it is employers have to make these drastic decisions that are going to affect the workforce, what we would have appreciated was that meaningful consultation applied. Now—

Mr. Chairman: Put a pin. Before I go on it member Forde, a direct question: How many matters have BIGWU directed to the Industrial Court, before I go to member Forde for the next question, to BIGWU?

Mr. Brown: It would be in the proximity of less than 10 but one of the matters and it is a—or two of the matters, one is an OSH offence against Republic Bank; one is another unilateral

implementation of a return-to-work policy, again with Republic Bank. Those matters affect over 3,000 workers in one swoop. And we cannot escape that we live in an enclosed environment and when it is a company with the strength and size of Republic Bank takes that type of action, there is no doubt in my mind that other companies are waiting with bated breath to see what happens so that they can follow suit. So it is very important, you see, the type of precedents that are set, especially in unionized environments like this where there is a specific legal duty to not only meet, but to bargain in good faith before these decisions are taken. Because if that had happened, we could have averted going to the Industrial Court.

Now, that matter is not going to be heard until the 1st and 10th of February. So you have workers now, in Republic Bank, who are receiving warning letters for not being vaccinated and not providing a PCR test, which they cannot afford. And if you follow the bank's timeline as to how it is they are going to treat with these workers, those workers will be possibly suspended in January before the court date in February. So it has a significant effect—

Mr. Chairman: So are these 10 matters taken to the Industrial Court all in relation to workers who have been mandated to be vaccinated by the institution you identified—

Mr. Brown: There are issues surrounding COVID. It may be different things in terms and conditions and so, but a significant amount affects unvaccinated workers—

Mr. Chairman: So workers have been threatened with termination if they have not been vaccinated?

Mr. Brown: Sorry? Beg your pardon?

Mr. Chairman: Workers have been threatened with termination if they have not been vaccinated or could not provide proof of vaccination?

Mr. Brown: Yes, warning letters—on the 29th of November, 2021, Republic Bank would have issued and began its mandate to issue warning letters to unvaccinated workers who have not provided PCR tests and who simply cannot afford to.

Mr. Chairman: How many workers would have written to the union in response to that mandate?

Mr. Brown: We are in the process of data collection because, like I said, that happened on the 29th of November and thus far, it is somewhere between 300 and 100.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Member Forde, go ahead, please.

Mr. Forde: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Johnson, and the gentlemen who just spoke, what is his name, Chairman? The comrade who just spoke, what is his name?

Mr. Brown: Mr. Brown, Jason Brown.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Brown and Mr. Johnson.

Mr. Forde: Right. Yeah. I know he said a lot. I know this is really not my form of questioning because I know member Sen. Avinash Singh brought it up with regard to the vaccination. But in all that you all have said, what are your suggestions to Republic Bank? Could you just give a quick synopsis? How can we, during a pandemic, regularize the situation? Quickly, a quick point, amidst all that you all are—

Mr. Brown: Well, before the vaccination there were three main things, the three Ws: wash your hands, watch your distance and wear your mask. Right? One of the things that we have criticized Republic Bank for is that they are selectively picking what it is they want to do, in terms of contraction and prevention and that sort of thing.

For instance, they have not mandated strictly the social distancing of six feet apart. They have conveniently, or to their own convenience, turned a blind eye to some of that in some instances. So one of the things we are telling them is: “Listen, even before the vaccination, there were three Ws. Do not cherry-pick which ones you want to use.” The other thing is do not force people or threaten people to take the vaccination. Continue to engage them and educate them and hear what it is they have to say. Because you see, you cannot run away from this virus. This virus was born in a—

Mr. Forde: Comrade Brown, how are we to save lives?

Mr. Johnson: Okay. Let me just indicate if I could, Mr. Forde, that I did say earlier that the union would have worked with the umbrella trade union bodies and we would have presented, not just BIGWU, but we would have presented collectively a risk assessment that was done with OSH experts to both the Employers Consultative Association and to the chambers and we have shared it with employers as necessary, which shows whether workers are vaccinated or unvaccinated, the processes that can be used to ensure that you have a relatively safe workplace. So that is a comprehensive risk assessment document. I cannot go into too much of the details now but we would have done that and it would have been presented as showing how we can operate whether with vaccinated or unvaccinated workers. So that—

Mr. Forde: We would not try to justify that but, again, daily we hear the Ministry of Health and the protocols from the local media and international media with regard to the percentages unvaccinated versus vaccinated and the hospital arena—

Mr. Chairman: Member Forde, if I could interrupt. Member Forde, while I understand the dialogue you are trying to initiate, I do not think this is the forum—

Mr. Forde: I am moving from it.

Mr. Chairman:—to engage the union in whether or not the mandatory vaccination is the way to go. So let us move on from that, please.

Mr. Forde: Right. Pandemic leave. Right? We identified the pandemic leave versus whatever leave we have. Right? And again, yes, we did not reach the stage of the pandemic leave but again, through the Government, the public service, individuals went home, received their full salary. Again, I do not know with regard to some of the private sectors how they would have operated and then we also mentioned, Mr. Brown, the National Insurance System, which is to say that once you are registered, contributing to the system, you go home without salary, you would then qualify for the sickness benefit as we all well know. So those are topics that we do not necessarily need to get into. But my question—my line of questioning actually, I want to go to the point of—with regard to your submission which stated:

The union is monitoring the practicality of work-from-home or remote work arrangements on an ongoing basis.

This is stated in your submission, objective one, question 3, page 4. And my question is: Have any of your members reported any challenges related to work-from-home or remote work arrangements implemented by your employers? And then the second question is: What type of guidance/advice has your union provided to its members with regard to work-from-home or remote work arrangements as stipulated by some of your organizations. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Johnson: Yes, thanks again for that question. Just to say that our union would have done, and along with JTUM, a work from home paper—a paper on work from home which would have looked at the pros and cons. Because yes, there are advantages—apparent advantages of working from home but there are also challenges that we would have looked at and some of those would have come up, for example, the issue of resources that a worker might have at home. The tendency is to assume that once you give a worker a computer or a laptop and a phone, a mobile phone, that that basically means that they can work from home. But we have to consider a number of things. I mean, the Internet security, Internet bandwidth.

Just on this particular call I can recognize that there are differences in—so when you put a worker to work from home and they have a package for their—whatever—their Flow, their cable,

et cetera and you have a whole amount of data that they have to access, what we find sometimes is that because of the level of bandwidth or Internet facility the worker has, that it may not always be practical. Then you have security arrangements, both in terms of the data and also, the potential issues of confidentiality, especially within the finance sector, where information is being shared over workers' home Internet system, et cetera, which may not necessarily have all the levels of security or encryption as necessary. So it does open the workers, we have found, in some areas, to what potential challenges or even disciplinary processes if it is data is compromised by a third party. So that is an area that one has to look at.

The whole issue of—okay, so workers are working from home but they also have school—school is off in the main, so that there are a number of complications working from home. How does a worker operate? In some areas, internationally, we have shown where, if a company is going to push for a work-from-home arrangement on an ongoing basis, even here in the Caribbean, FirstCaribbean International Bank wants to move to—and we represent those workers—and they want to move largely to work from home but are you going to—what about a work station or a desk, et cetera? These are things that we need to look at or some kind of one-off payment to ensure that—to allow workers to acquire the appropriate level of a desk and chair, that type of thing.

We have workers working from home on a bed; workers working in their porch, in their gallery, in their kitchen, in their living room and they have a child right across who is also schooling. We have workers from home where the home has one or two devices but you have, you know, three or four children, et cetera. So that there are a number of issues that you face when you have this work-from-home arrangement: competition for resources, competition for space, you know, the possibility of compromise of data because people who are hearing your conversation, you are a bank worker, you are talking on the phone, but other people in your home are hearing your conversations regarding a customer's private affairs.

Mr. Chairman: But have the banks offered guidelines to employees regarding all these legal liability issues with work from home? Just the same as you have identified before, the situation with the risks of not been vaccinated or being vaccinated and that discussion from working from home and having to focus on home issues during the height of the pandemic, which can be now considered now, and also persons' Internet allowance and all those issues that would have come up as the private sector and public sector transitioned in the emergency mode, have those guidelines been issued by the employer?

Mr. Johnson: What we have found in many instances, Mr. Chair, because of the unprecedented nature of this pandemic and the need for expediency is that very often the cart has come before the horse, so that—

Mr. Chairman: You know what, while I hear this unprecedented, and it is unprecedented, we are 18 months in, almost two years, so we cannot still be using unprecedented and emergency as caveats for not having policy and guidelines at this stage, to me.

Mr. Johnson: Yes, and I agree. We, as I said, we would have given our—it is something that we are working with. We have given our recommendations. As I said this, union has produced a paper with all our observations on the pros and cons. Because we are not saying it is a totally bad thing but we are saying to all employers, this is what we have observed, which, you know, might be good. These are the areas of concern or challenges and we would like you to address these matters.

We know with some institutions, as I said, like with FirstCaribbean, they are looking at it and they have developed a comprehensive policy. That is, as best I would say, a work in progress. It is not a perfect situation at the moment. But we are prepared to dialogue with employers in order to ensure that it is gotten right. But it is not—I cannot say that I have seen comprehensive work-from-home policies. If that is the question you are asking. I cannot say. Maybe Mr. Brown can indicate to you. But I have not seen anyone, except from one or two institutions that we deal with at this moment.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. We are 30 minutes out of ending and it would be remiss of us not to include the other stakeholders.

Member Nakhid, we are moving now to the Aviation Communication and Allied Workers Union. Member Nakhid, your questions, please.

Mr. Nakhid: My first question for the union would be: Is your union satisfied with the policy proposals, guidelines and advisory services that are being provided by them, MOL, the Ministry of Labour, to stakeholders in response to the unique industrial relations issues generated by this COVID-19?

Mr. Farmer: The brief answer to your question is no. In terms of—as I pointed out in the introductory remarks, one of the things with respect to the payment of certain grants and so on, there have been people who have applied for the grants and to date, they have not received any grants.

I would also want to point out that there are some other issues and when I had my hand up, I wanted to know whether in fact, because in the interest—and it would be directed to the Chair—because in the interest of saving time, I was wondering if the Committee—because there are a number of things, for instance, while people are laid off, they may not be paying their health insurance, they may not be paying let us say NIS contributions and they may be interfering with vacation, et cetera. And I was wondering whether in fact, because of the fact that people are losing, let us say benefits and so on, if it falls in the realm for unions to do, let us say collective bargaining on their own, some may gain, some may not gain. And I was wondering whether in fact if the Committee can perhaps set up some minimum guidelines with respect to these issues, so that there would be some give and take that they would see. It is not that everyone would agree with it. It can be massaged and so on—[*Technical difficulties*]
—and whether in fact there is some sort of reimbursement as we come out of the pandemic.

So that in terms of answering your questions, I think that these are some of the things that need to be addressed and I can say that we are not satisfied because we particularly have been at the losing end of the stick.

Mr. Nakhid: Well then, the natural follow-up question, Mr. Farmer would be: What have you done to address the issue if you are not satisfied? What have you done? What steps have you—

Mr. Farmer: We have coordinated with the umbrella bodies like JTUM and NATUC, and so on. And we have also—I provided some response on that—but we have also pound the pavement with some members, going to find out at the various bodies, et cetera, and the answers that we got was that the grants have been approved but the funds were not available. And this is where we are at. I think that we did, although I cannot—but I was trying to put my hand on it. But if I do, I think that we did write one of the Ministries or the Minister of Finance with respect to it. But we got no response.

So I do not know—[*Technical difficulties*]
—that we were involved in, in terms of attempting to satisfy the concerns and so on, of our members.

Mr. Nakhid: Mr. Farmer, that is extremely interesting. You said that you submitted—your workers submitted and they were approved but they were told that there were no funds available. I have been on this Committee and that has not come out to light. We have not heard that before, that grant—we have heard that people have received grants.

Mr. Farmer: That is what the experience has been and that is what came back to us from some of

the members. And that is what we got when we visited the offices of the Ministries that are supposed to provide the various—

Mr. Nakhid: [*Technical difficulties*]—grants and so. You were told that the funds were not yet made available by the Ministry of Finance?

Mr. Farmer: Yes. And to date, as far as I know, the workers have not gotten any relief as a result of their applications.

Mr. Nakhid: Chair, maybe you can get in on this. I do not think we had such an answer yet in our time of speaking with the stakeholders. Did we hear anyone say that the Ministry of Finance has not provided funds? We have not heard that as yet.

Mr. Chairman: I have not heard that before. I have heard there were challenges in processing. I have heard there were challenges in some compliance issues. I have heard here were some communication issues with some persons who applied. But I have not heard what has been identified here.

Following up on your question, member Nakhid, to Mr. Farmer, in terms of CAL—because you represent some 500 CAL workers—you started earlier on in your introduction by identifying what you described as an arbitrary methodology used by CAL to determine who worked, who did not work. It did not seem like a last in, first out situation.

11.55 a.m.

Could you give us a sense of what has transpired with CAL workers? Has there been actually—did the percentage of retrenchment, if any—because CAL's routes had been curtailed during the pandemic. And how this has affected the workers you employ? What percentage of workers have been significantly affected? How many have been taken back up since CAL started back to fly again? And what the prospect is moving forward in terms of whether or not these workers have been given any assurances moving forward or not?

Mr. Farmer: Well, we had been advocating from the very beginning that there should be some form of rotation in order to establish some equity among the workers. The company absolutely refused to do any rotation at all. When they eventually—when it reached the Ministry and they eventually decided that it would be a consideration, they instituted a hands-off approach. What they said was that because of the fact it would require—they said that it would require a recognized majority union and that is something that is in the court that we are attempting to deal with. They

are saying that workers who are employed will have to give up a space to the people. So they applied a hands-off situation with respect to the rotation which we thought was unfair.

Mr. Chairman: I do not understand what that means. What you just said, the workers would have to apply, clarify that for us. What does that mean? And which workers would apply to?

Mr. Farmer: Yeah. Well, for instance, with the flight attendants, who it affected to a large extent, those who were working were supposed to give up their jobs so that those who were laid off would be able to get a job. And that, you know, was—it did not cut it. They knew that it would not be—and apart from that, they were saying that

there would have to be, in terms of the voting, 100 per cent acceptance in order for it to work. So that they knew that it would not work and it was not genuine consultations in terms of resolving the situation at the Ministry. In terms of people going back, I understand that by the 15th, that most of the people who would be laid off would be back at work.

Mr. Chairman: Had there been any discussion on—because I know the term “furloughed” was used quite a lot internationally. And in some instances, internationally, “furloughed” meant an arrangement was made or was agreed to between the employer, the union and the employees for—if the entity returned to some level of profitability, the remunerations lost may have been have been recouped at some point. Has there been any discussion in that regard, or is that now water under the bridge and then we move forward from here, or has that conversation been initiated at all between the union and CAL?

Mr. Farmer: That conversation was never initiated. It was never had. And even though we would have put forward some type—because we knew nothing about furlough in terms of being part of the dialogue in Trinidad and Tobago. We proposed something along the lines of the RSDA where you would have—so therefore, before it becomes the three months that they were saying, that you would move those people who were working and you put a new set of people in. But it is just that the company just refused. They did it for a while in Jamaica—

Mr. Chairman: Did the measures—were the measures instituted—for example, you mentioned flight attendants, initiated across all levels of the organization? So was it employees, ground-level employees, mid-management, management across the board or was it only particular cadre of employees?

Mr. Farmer: No. There are—in terms of the last in, first out, we know of four people who came to us—I think, three or four people, two or three people who were supposed to have been promoted.

They were not promoted. So that in terms of the layoff, they perhaps should have gone back to their substantive positions—and they should have gone back to their substantive positions but that was not done. And the workers—and they were laid off while you had junior people working in their place or filling their roles and keeping their jobs.

In some cases—in one case that I know of there was a guy who had cancer and he had been at home and when he came back, they had put him in a different department and he had asked to work from home. They absolutely refused to allow him to work from home because of his immunocompromised situation and he remains out, as a matter of fact, having to face—and as a matter of fact, he was on vacation and when he came back out from vacation, one of the guys who worked in his department actually got COVID and he came—

Mr. Chairman: What we do not want to do is personalize it to that level of who—

Mr. Farmer: I know.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. So we want to stay away from that sort of direct personalization issues, persons' situations because those may be subject to legal issues down the road. So we want to stay away from that sort of thing. Member Forde, you have a question for Mr. Farmer?

Mr. Forde: I will pass for now, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Farmer, in your submission, the union stated you received 140 complaints of persons whose applications for salary relief grants were approved. How did this—has been resolved from the representation you provided? And are these payments still outstanding in terms of the processing of these employees that you represent? And I think member Mohit has a question, if I am not mistaken.

Mr. Farmer: As far as we know, none of the applications were satisfied. None. We do not have actual copies of the applications but these were as a result of people who would have been laid off, that we know that they are saying that none of them had received any sort of relief from the Government to date.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Naime.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chair—

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead. Go ahead, member Mohit.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chair, in terms of these approved grants for persons who would not have received

their grants, would this be under the Ministry of Finance alone in terms of the NIS Salary Relief Grant payments or does this include social development grants as well, income support?

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Farmer.

Mr. Farmer: Yes. As far as I understand, it would be Income Support Grants by the Ministry of social welfare or whatever the name of the Ministry is.

Mr. Chairman: Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. Mr. Naime—member Mohit, you have another question?

Ms. Mohit: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, that is it.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Mr. Naime, I see your hand is up. Do you have an intervention or a question?

Mr. Naime: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Naime: Yes, I have an intervention. I have heard enough to make a statement beyond representing the TTMA but to really speak for the business sector. One of the things that we reflect back on the impact of the pandemic, what became glaring is the lack of a social safety net by having in place a NIS unemployment relief programme. And I know that we are running out of time and I would certainly not want to lose the opportunity to make this statement and it crosses literally almost everything I have heard to date beginning with an NIS that is incentivized with an unemployment relief programme will garner greater acceptance and enrolment by the population, just to start off.

And secondly, I am sure the best intentions for the ad hoc grant system that was instituted through the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services was the best efforts by everyone but it led to a simple point. They were overwhelmed and I think that we should learn from this episode of the pandemic to—

Mr. Chairman: But from your perspective as the head of the TTMA, the Ministry of Labour, last time we convened, indicated the manufacturing sector was one of the hardest hit sectors which means that your membership would have seen or needed a lot more intervention in some cases than other sectors. How have they fared—

Mr. Naime: No—

Mr. Chairman: And how is—that is not so?

Mr. Naime: That is not so, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Well, correct me, please—

Mr. Naime: I am here to move beyond manufacturing. We are still on track to double our manufacturing output by 2025. We are resilient. We are okay. We have had to remodel and do a lot of new things. Literally we are in a world now where everything we do actually, we are doing it now virtually and we are now into an industrial 4.0 generation. So the manufacturing resilience, we are there. I am not here much to—[*Technical difficulties*]
—a little time—[*Technical difficulties*]
—never-ending and Mr. Joseph—[*Technical difficulties*]
—to sanitizers and signage and we reacted very quickly to and contributed your question.

Going back to this point, we have, as the business community, to say, we are ready to make our contribution into an unemployment relief programme matched by the staff. And as the chair of the standing committee for trade dealing with COTED and Cariforum and EPA issues, I see absolutely no problem with funding this with the NIS through the European grants. So it is a missing part of our social safety net that exposed our most vulnerable to—we all know it, depending on their families to get through this.

Mr. Chairman: So you think a more formalized approach needs to been taken including European grants?

Mr. Naime: Just to interpose. What I have just said to everything I just heard, this malfunctioning, this not responding, this not happening, yes, it is all because it is an ad hoc mechanism we have just created to accommodate a pandemic—of course, what is expected. Okay. Things are now getting back to some normal. I understand that the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services has actually got their wheels turning. You know, they had to even deal with multiple applications of the same person. All of a sudden they were absorbed into a vortex they were never developed for. And you know what? Give them kudos because I would not have expected anybody anywhere to pull this off. And it is a gap and I would like to posit that statement that I had made regarding the review of the NIS. Start off actuarially and build a programme that allows the business community and the labour force to work here together and apply a meaningful contribution.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. We are going to—

Mr. Nakhid: Chairman, before we sign off on Mr. Naime—

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, member Nakhid.

Mr. Nakhid: I had a chance to look at what he submitted with the charts and so, and I thought it was something very instructive that other sectors, other industries could use to indicate quite clearly who are—which workers have been affected and which have not been affected, so if anybody gets a chance to look at that.

But I will go back to Mr. Farmer who—I thank you, Mr. Farmer, for being so forthright in your presentation because we have gotten information from you that we have not got before. So I would just like to ask you a follow-up question. Your submission indicated to us that there are about 47 retrenchment matters not reported to the Ministry of Labour in which the union actually asked the Ministry of Labour to intervene. However, your union, until now, has received no response. You spoke about that before. Can you tell us when did you union make that request? And what was the follow-up? Do you have that information?

Mr. Farmer: I do not have the exact date but it would have been subsequent to the exercise that was done, I think, around the end of June or the end of July. But, you know, I can always forward the date and the communication to the Committee.

Mr. Nakhid: That would be wonderful, Mr. Farmer. So let me take that onus off you and go to the Ministry of Labour. Let me ask the Ministry of Labour who—the representative here. Have you received the request from the union? From the aviation union to intervene in the matter, first of all?

Ms. Willis: Thank you, member. I will ask my Chief Labour Relations Officer, Ms. Sabina Gomez, to respond to your question.

Mr. Nakhid: All right. So the information is not available, so I ask you this then.

Mr. Chairman: No. She did not say it is not available. She is referring you to her colleague.

Mr. Nakhid: “Oh”, her colleague is present. Okay. Sorry. Sorry, Ms. Willis. I thought she was not. Thank you.

Ms. Gomez: Good afternoon, Chair. Good afternoon, members of the Committee. With respect to the question from Mr. Farmer dealing with ACAWU, I cannot say whether or not, but I know that

the matter with respect to the retrenchment of the workers of CAL, that was conciliated upon in the Ministry. So maybe he could shed some more light. I do not know if those are the matters you are referring to, Mr. Farmer?

Mr. Farmer: No. The question was with respect to the request for intervention by the Minister of Labour.

Mr. Nakhid: Correct.

Mr. Farmer: And we got no response on that particular letter. But what I observed from Ministry—what I observed that happens at the Ministry is that when it comes to certain things that they seem to think happens to be sensitive, they will always ask for additional information and keep asking for all sorts of additional information and never come up, let us say, with even acceptance of the report.

And there is one particular issue that I know of that has been going on maybe since May or June this year. I think it has been going on for some time, you know, and it is something I intend to address at some point. So that we would like—if it is that the Ministry thinks that it cannot deal with the particular problem, then perhaps what needs to be done is that it be referred to the court and let the court decide.

Ms. Gomez: All right—

Mr. Chairman: All right. Go ahead, Ms. Gomez.

Ms. Gomez: If I can respond? Now, with respect to the issue with ACAWU and it has to do with—I am just—I am not sure if he has a specific question but with respect to ACAWU, there was issue of successorship. When Caribbean—when “Bee-Wee” changed to Caribbean Airlines and there was the amalgamation with Air Jamaica—

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Ms. Gomez—

Ms. Gomez: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Put a pause. This is not the remit of this Committee. Those issues you can resolve with Mr. Farmer privately. Okay? We are running out of time and while I appreciate the opportunity for a group and entities to resolve their issues, this is not the forum for that. Okay? I am going to go now finally—because we have Mr. Prentice here and we have not gotten a chance to deal with him yet. Mr. Prentice, apologies for now getting to you earlier on. But can you give

us a sense of the entities you represent from the Amalgamated Workers Union? And what has been your experience with your charges during the pandemic? And we are going to ask you to be concise, please. Apologies for that.

Mr. Prentice: Okay. That is okay. We represent the workers at the Bermudez Biscuit Company. We also represent the workers at East Side and New City Mall. We represent workers at Royal Castle. We represent workers at the Port of Spain Corporation. Some of the challenges that we would have had mainly would have come from the biscuit company, Bermudez Biscuit Company and also from Royal Castle. The challenge there would stem from the fact that Royal Castle would have been actually closed because Royal Castle would not have been one of those entities that would have been looked upon as essential in nature up to that point. And the union had to make numerous amount of intervention as it relates to how the management of that entity treats and deals with Royal Castle issues as it relates to the workers being at home. The workers had some incentive that was in existence and eventually at one point it was stopped.

The company engaged really in terms of trying and deal with outside entities to get some of their products out there on the market as it relates to selling the food and so on, the chicken and so on, and not actually depending on the workers within the industry.

We had challenges as it relates Bermudez Biscuit Company. We would have had a lot of dialogue with the company in terms of developing a plan that would have helped the workers that were in the casual pool of workers because you would have had the regular workers. While we would have made some adjustment in terms of the working hours, in order to keep the doors of the entity open to provide the nation with food, the reality was we had difficulties dealing with those that were on a contract-type of work and so on, which would have allowed the company to function under normal circumstances but changes had to be made. So we did make some progress in that regard.

But the biggest challenge for us all was Royal Castle. The suffering of Royal Castle workers and the problems that they would have faced and we would have had, at one time, suspended even the union dues. And unions depend on union dues in order to carry out their business on a daily basis and we took a position, a principle position at that time to suspend the union dues so workers would not have been allowed to pay dues at that point in time. We still have

matters. We will try to settle our matters bilaterally outside of the court and we still have some of those existing at the moment.

Mr. Chairman: I am going to give the final question to member Mohit to Mr. Prentice from the Amalgamated Workers Union. Member Mohit.

Ms. Mohit: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, if we can have this question answered in terms of the estimated number of persons awaiting the grant payments. And I will add this in the interest of time: What type of representation did your union make to the relevant Ministries on behalf of these workers concerning these outstanding grant payments?

Mr. Prentice: Mr. Chair, what really happened, as it relates to the representation for workers who would have applied for the grants, yes, we do have some outstanding. I do not have the numbers as we speak now but we could provide you with those numbers. But it is mainly in the two—both fast food industries, the Bermudez Biscuit Company and the Royal Castle area for which some members, especially the Royal Castle area, which would have applied for the grant and today they have not received any such support. So we can provide you all, the Committee, with the information as it relates to that number.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Prentice.

Ms. Mohit: Can you see for us, Mr. Chair, one additional question?

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead.

Ms. Mohit: Can you just state for us whether the grants being mentioned by your entity would be, you know, the percentages in terms of—based on your conversation with persons or reporting system, whether these grants, applications would have been made to social development or the Ministry of Finance for the salary relief grants?

Mr. Prentice: They would have been made to social development.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Ms. Mohit: Mr. Chairman, in addition, I believe that most of these mentioned were under the social development Ministry and I think that, you know, it is a serious concern and I will just like to place that on the record. Since for some time now, it has been a concern in terms of grants being approved and funds not being available.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Thank you, member Mohit. Thank you, Mr. Prentice. Unfortunately,

we are out of time. There is another JSC scheduled for one o'clock so this time we are going to have to wrap up. I am going to invite the heads of the delegations to provide their closing comments, starting with the Acting Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour, Ms. Willis.

Ms. Willis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And once again to say thank you for inviting us to this morning's session. We look forward to the outcomes of the deliberations of the Committee in terms of the information that has been provided. We recognized from the discussion that there some issues that the Ministry would need to address but we continue to encourage persons to seek advice from the Ministry of Labour in terms of their matters, whether it be employers or trade unions, continue to seek that advice from our Conciliation Advocacy and Advisory Division. Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. And it is interesting you say that because it seems that some of the advice being sought over the last two interfaces we had have not been as forthcoming from the Ministry, especially in terms of guidance on work-from-home policy. I do not know if the vaccination policy is before the Cabinet in terms of a paper but very often the private sector waits for the State sector to lead the way, so to speak. And if the guidance is not there, then you will find the ad hoc approaches starts taking place and then everything ends back up with the Ministry of Labour for conciliation and sometimes to the Industrial Court. So you see, when the Ministry is not as efficient in terms of advising, it leads to issues down the road.

Ms. Willis: Thank you, Mr. Chair. But with regard to the work-from-home policy, yes, our Industrial Relations Advisory Committee would have put out guidelines which we would have shared on our social media pages for employers to look at as well as trade unions. The responsibility for a work-from-home policy is currently right now being addressed by the Ministry of Planning and Development and we are working with that Ministry in terms of that issue.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. And if you could supply for us—because we did not get a chance to ask you. You gave quite a comprehensive account, your colleague that is, of the persons who would have lost jobs and the net job gains in certain sectors. If you could supply for us the recovery of jobs since the country reopened from your data set, that will be helpful to the Committee.

Ms. Willis: Yes. We will provide that, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Thank you so much, Ms. Willis. Next we move to the TTMA, Mr.

Naime.

Mr. Naime: Well, it has been a pleasure to engage and to have the forum of such eminent [*Technical difficulties*] and it would be remiss to not say to them that the business community wants to find the win-wins moving forward. [*Technical difficulties*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Namie. Did you finish?

Mr. Naime: No. I think I had a glitch. I would like to add another sentence.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead, please.

Mr. Naime: Again, just to make my case study, that Royal Castle matter [*Technical difficulties*] Hello? Are you hearing me now?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are hearing you. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Naime: Sorry. Even with the Royal Castle matter, with an unemployment relief programme predicating all of this, would not have been absorbing the unions and the companies at this time and we need to get a more national alignment of messaging to get through this. Yes, one of the bugbears in what I heard was the cost of PCR testing for people who are anti-vaxxers to get through this.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Naime. And we go now to Mr. Johnson, General Secretary of the Banking, Insurance and General Workers Union. Mr. Johnson.

Mr. Johnson: Yes. Thank you again, Chair. And thanks to this Committee for engaging us and giving the opportunity to share our experiences. Our trade union continues on a daily basis to deal both with our members in what is called our recognized majority units where we have membership. But what we have also observed during this period is that, which we did not get a chance to address, is that a number of what we call walk-ins, people who may not necessarily belong to unions but they face issues, they come into our offices for guidance or for cases to be dealt with. And we have noticed quite an increase in that area which suggests that there is quite a number of workers out there who have issues where they may not be in a unionized institution but they do need to have representation as well. So that is also an area that has been engaging our attention.

And I know—I will just end with a question, I know Mr. Forde did ask, in terms what did unions do to assist their members. And I just want to end by indicating that our union certainly as well did take a number of personal initiatives, hampers and—because food is a key issue that we

found people needed at this time.

12.25 p.m.

So wherever we—the most vulnerable of our members, once a need identified, we did seek to assist them in that regard. And we also did provide digital devices to several schools in remote areas as part of our social responsibility in this pandemic. So those are areas that we continue to look at and our union will continue to be proactive as we deal with the industrial relations and employment issues arising out of this pandemic. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, Mr. Johnson. You raised a really good point about persons who do not fall within the formal representation category and if you could supply a report on any of the stakeholders. If there is anything you think you would like to submit, you can supply it in writing to the Secretariat. We will appreciate that greatly. And if you could supply a report on those walk-ins, in parentheses, it will be helpful in capturing that cadre of persons who would have been affected but may not have been contemplated.

Mr. Johnson: Yes. Certainly, Chair, we will do.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Mr. Edghill of the T&T Coalition of Services Industries.

Mr. Edghill: Thank you, Chair. Again thank you very much, yourself and the members of the Committee, for giving TTCSI the opportunity to participate this morning and for inviting us to this meeting. We do look forward to further collaboration and consultations with you all and to facilitating provision of data for guidance in terms of the decision-making process that you all have on your hands. So thank you again and we look forward to more discussions.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. We are looking forward to that report from your CEO, Ms. Guyadeen, in terms of the data collection analysis that you said should be completed by year's end.

Mr. Edghill: Perfect. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: It could be submitted to the Secretariat. Thank you so much. Mr. Farmer of the Aviation Communications and Allied Workers Union. Mr. Farmer, go ahead, please.

Mr. Farmer: Thank you, Mr. Chair. We want to say thanks for the intervention and the invitation to submit our concerns and our comments. We also want to confirm that we will send the requested information to you and we look forward to the Committee's recommendations in the final report.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you and any other information you have, please feel free to forward it to the Secretariat.

Mr. Farmer: Certainly, will do.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Mr. Prentice of the Amalgamated Workers Union. Go ahead, please, Mr. Prentice. Mr. Prentice, you are muted. Could you unmute your mike, please? Thank you. You are still muted, Mr. Prentice.

Mr. Prentice: You are hearing me?

Mr. Chairman: Yes please. Go ahead.

Mr. Prentice: Okay. I also would like to thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the rest of the Committee, for inviting the Amalgamated Workers Union to this important discussion at this point in time. One of the things I would just like to leave with you all today—and I hope when the plans are going forward that the sanitation industry in this country, especially during a time as a pandemic, must be looked at seriously in terms of the importance and the essential contribution that can be made through the sanitation industry and have the industry being highly respected as against what is existing today. While we have in the corporation, a certain standard is put out there, we cannot say the same for the private sector. We would like to see the private sector come on board in terms of the level of—lifting that level of the work that is done in the industry. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: And we would appreciate if you could give us a sense of what has been the effect of the pandemic on sanitation workers who would have been front and centre in a more exposed way all the way through the pandemic. They did not have any rest or respite from this. So we would appreciate a report from you if you can.

Mr. Prentice: I will most definitely.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you so much, Mr. Prentice. I would like to thank all stakeholders for their participation in this interaction and the one before in these important deliberations; Committee members for their continued support and participation; the staff and Secretariat, the Office of the Parliament for your procedure and logistical support; and, of course, our viewing and listening audience for your comments and your participation. This is our last public meeting for 2021, so we would like to take this time to also wish you and the rest of the country a safe, enjoyable Christmas. Please, if you have no medical reason not to, I am going to put myself out there and

say, please be vaccinated—and a bright, safe and prosperous New Year. Please continue to adhere to all COVID-19 rules, regulations and stipulations and be safe. This meeting is now adjourned.

12.30 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*