

History of Labour Day

Before 1961, May 24 was celebrated in Jamaica as Empire Day. The day was celebrated as the birthday of Queen Victoria, who was credited with granting slaves in Jamaica and the rest of the British Empire, their freedom.

The holiday also served the purpose of reminding Jamaica of the greatness and glory of England – the Mother Country. School children were required to attend school on the morning of the holiday to participate in the flag-raising ceremonies and in the singing of ‘Rule Britannia’, the British national anthem, ‘God Save the King’ and other British patriotic songs. In 1961, the then Premier, the late Right Excellent Norman Washington Manley, National Hero, presented a Bill in Parliament which abolished Empire Day as a public holiday and substituted instead, the commemorative celebration of May 23, 1938, when Jamaicans first declared their mass intent to seek freedom from colonial oppression. This day was called Labour Day.

From then until May 23, 1971, Labour Day was mainly celebrated by the trade unions in collaboration with the political parties to which they were affiliated, in the form of public rally meetings and marches. These were done primarily in the corporate area.

There were occasions when the marches of the opposing major trade unions and the political parties clashed, contrary to the original concept of Mr. Manley, that the intention of the day should be a demonstration of unity among workers in Jamaica.

There was one additional dimension to the celebration, instituted by the Most Hon. Hugh Shearer when he became Prime Minister in 1967, in the form of a Labour Day reception at Jamaica House.

In 1972, then Prime Minister, The Most Hon. Michael Manley announced a programme whereby the importance of labour to the development of Jamaica would be marked by a day of voluntary community participation in projects of benefit to the country.

The late Prime Minister’s invitation to the nation resulted in a tremendous national response and 600 projects, mainly of a beautification nature, were identified across the island.

The Palisadoes road was selected by Mr. Manley as the government’s inaugural National Labour Day project in 1972. It was decided that trees would be planted and land cleared on the Road, which led to the capital city’s airport.

Groups and individuals around the island followed the Prime Minister’s lead and planned projects of their own, such as the refurbishing of schools, community centres, state institutions and other public and private buildings.

Up to 1989, the decision about Labour Day projects rested in the hands of groups and individuals. However, things changed that year as the Jamaican government intervened and introduced themes as a guide for persons to assist in Labour Day activities.

The identification of a theme was meant to foster wider national involvement but did not compel citizens to be bound by the theme.