



# BELIZE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

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# 4792 Coney Drive, 2nd Floor Withfield Tower, P.O. Box 291 , Belize City, Belize, Central America

Monday, August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## **BCCI Calls on the Government to Consult on Amendments to**

### **Labour Laws**

#### **- For Immediate Release-**

Belize's economy is estimated to contract by perhaps as much as twenty percent this year, affecting every business, every citizen, and shrinking the government's revenues. It is unrealistic to assume that life continues as normal and that employers and employees remain unaffected. As such, the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) views progressive tripartism among Government, employers and employees as critically important to the way Belize negotiates this global pandemic and the resultant local impact.

The BCCI echoes the sentiments expressed in the Senate on August 19<sup>th</sup> 2020 by Senator for the business community, Senator Markhelm Lizarraga, regarding the recently tabled and passed Labour (Amendment) Bill 2020. No consultation between the Government and the BCCI occurred on the proposed amendments; we first saw a copy of the Bill when advising Senator Lizarraga in preparation for the Senate meeting a few days before it was tabled. The Labour Advisory Board (LAB), which exists for the purpose of developing amendments that may alter the legal framework for employer-employee relations, was not utilized. The BCCI is actively represented on the LAB and is the official International Labour Organization (ILO) employers' representative for Belize as well as the largest employers' organization in the country.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, for the first time, that Belize's labor law does not address a pandemic and how labour relations are affected by State ordered business closures. The BCCI recognizes that the amendment was an attempt by the Government of Belize to address this unclear area of the law. However, due to the failure to consult with stakeholders, including the BCCI, the amendment does not effect any meaningful change. Prior to the amendment, employers could have varied employment contracts, with the consent of their employees. The amendment does not therefore give employers or employees any additional right or discretion.

Given the fact that many emergent issues caused by the pandemic have magnified the need for updated labour laws, the BCCI calls on the Government of Belize to urgently reengage and consult with employers' and employees' representatives to comprehensively review and modernize the country's labour laws, which, in their current form, fail to address a host of pertinent concerns of all relevant stakeholders.

Accordingly, it is expedient for the government, particularly the Ministry of Labour, to urgently convene the Labour Advisory Board (LAB) in accordance with *section 19 and 20* of the Labour Act, so that the Minister can benefit from the insights of all interested parties who are represented on the LAB.

If our country is to weather the health and economic impacts of the pandemic, we must work together to put in place the measures required to ensure resilience and rapid recovery. It is time for public and private sector, employees and employers, to think differently about the new environment we are operating in. New, more flexible labour laws and a more collaborative approach to gearing up for growth will ensure that our country can become a shining example for the region. As a part of this, the BCCI reiterates our commitment to continue working with the Ministry of Labour and labour representatives to help move this economy forward. Belize's labour laws, as all stakeholders can agree, require an immediate and comprehensive review, a process that demands dedication to the principles of tripartism.

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