

# Belinda Wilson's Victory

June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Now that she has received an overwhelming mandate from teachers across the country to represent them as president of the Bahamas Union of Teachers (BUT), there are a number of concerns of teachers in our school system to which Belinda Wilson must give top priority.

Topping the list, of course, is security on campuses, an issue that was very much in the news this past school year as a result of a series of violent acts that occurred at several schools. Central to the debate precipitated by these violent acts was the decision by the government to remove uniformed police officers from school campuses, supposedly based on the premise that adequate security could be provided for the schools by a civilian force of trained security officers.

What's more, the Ministry of Education contended that most of the altercations among students occurred after school hours off school grounds, and to combat this, police surveillance was increased near the schools during this period.

Wilson is known to be in favor of having police officers on campuses; therefore, the Ministry should brace itself for the eventuality that she will not budge on this issue and plan over the summer vacation to develop a security program that will satisfy the union president, for this should not be an intractable issue for which a compromise cannot be reached.

As a former secretary general of the BUT, Wilson does not come to her new job without some knowledge of the other issues that concern many teachers, such as an improved pension plan. The past administration was successful in getting the Ministry to sign on to a new industrial agreement, but even with this new agreement, teachers are still grossly underpaid.

Wilson has a reputation of being a fighter for the rights of teachers, so increased pay may very well be one of the issues that she places on the front burner for her administration to champion.

Another matter that Wilson must give top priority is the reported \$100,000-plus in union funds that reportedly was unaccounted for during the last administration. The matter has been turned over to the police and is said to be under active investigation, but Wilson must insist that the police speed up the process and cooperate fully with them to remove any clouds of suspicion that may still be providing fodder for the rumor mill.

Indeed, a full and proper accounting of how the considerable funds taken in by the union in dues are spent should also be a priority of Wilson. There are more than 4,000 teachers in the public school system and each reportedly pays \$50 a month in dues, a figure that is even higher than the mandatory \$10 per week that members of the Bahamas Hotel Catering and Allied Workers Union pay.

Using the 4,000 number, this means that the BUT takes in approximately \$200,000 monthly or well in excess of \$2 million annually. Wilson can certainly improve her standing with rank-and-file members of the union if she introduces some programs to assist union members in accessing low-interest loans to, for example, further their education or even purchase a home.

Indeed, in the case of the latter, an arrangement could be made with Arawak Homes, which does such a wonderful job – in conjunction with Mount Tabor Full Gospel Baptist Church – in helping church members own their own homes.

Wilson unquestionably would discourage any opposition to her presidency when elections are held three years from now if she succeeds in making this a reality.