

Fears over legal threat from Angostura UWI changes mind on blanking activist Waithe from forum

ST AUGUSTINE

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FIXIN' T&T head Kirk Waithe was yesterday close to being blanked by The University of the West Indies (UWI) from speaking at a forum on sexual harassment in the workplace.

The intended action stemmed from fears of a fallout from a legal threat by Angostura Holdings Limited (AHL), to Waithe, to discontinue public talk about allegations of harassment against its chairman, Dr Rolph Balgobin.

Waithe yesterday confirmed that he was informed shortly before the Lunchtime Forum "Boardroom Bullies? What to do to end sexual harassment", hosted by the Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IDGS) at the St Augustine Campus, that he had been dis-invited.

He said his understanding of the change was the university felt it ought to protect its interests in light of the threat of legal action by AHL, on the very subject that

Waithe was set to speak on.

Waithe, a leading advocate currently for an end to sexual harassment, has also publicly condemned AHL for its handling of allegations made against Balgobin last year by a female executive, who was fired last Monday over what company sources claimed were performance issues.

Fixin' T&T has led a petition for a boycott of AHL products pending a "transparent" investigation into the accusations against Balgobin. Waithe was on Tuesday served a pre-action protocol letter by AHL's attorneys, JD Sellier and Company Ltd, warning that his campaign is defamatory and designed to hurt business.

Angostura had demanded that Waithe stop speaking publicly on the issue and also took particular offence to an image shared via social media last week by Fixin' T&T, showing a bottle of Angostura 1919 rum, superimposed with the phrase "Support Angostura, Support Sexual Harassment" and the

hashtags, #rolphwein-stein #harveybalgobin #drinksomethingelse.

The company has demanded the image be removed from all public sites and that Waithe pay for any damage or distress caused.

The letter to Waithe was not AHL's first threat of legal action on the Balgobin matter, the company having also recently sent a similar warning to activist Diana Mahabir-Wyatt.

Mahabir-Wyatt previously served as chair on a committee set up by AHL to investigate the Balgobin allegations and has publicly stated that the committee, which was quashed, was unable to do its work because the chairman refused to be interviewed.

She also spoke against the way the matter was handled and questioned the company's decision to clear Balgobin following an internal investigation by retired Justice Rolston Nelson, whom AHL hired for that purpose.

Directive given

Shortly before the

noon start of the forum at the Institute of International Relations, Waithe received a call from a forum organiser advising of a decision to dis-invite him from the panel of speakers based on AHL's threat of legal action.

Waithe was instead invited to attend as a member of the audience, which he declined.

He in turn asked that the change be put in writing and following an emergency meeting of organisers and other concerned persons, Waithe was reinstated.

Speaking to the *Express* following the session, Waithe said:

"I was told by the organisers that they had received a directive. It was painful and painfully disappointing because the university is where we are creating and nurturing our future. If we are creating a culture of fear and submission, then the future doesn't auger well."

He added: "I wasn't angry because I understood and appreciated that these women (organisers) were mostly likely following a directive, like of the women of

Angostura."

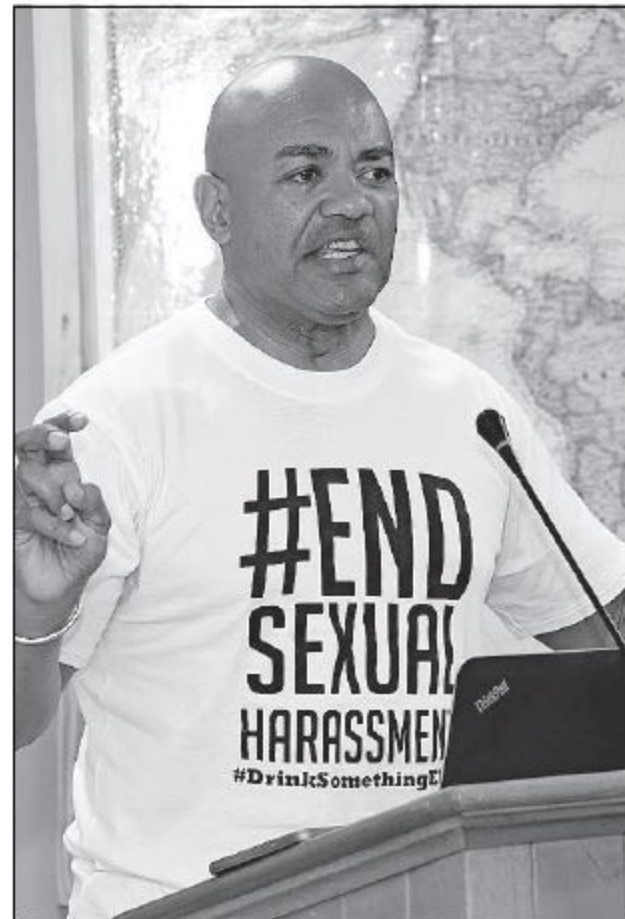
The *Express* reached out to former deputy principal at UWI and one of the IDGS organisers of the forum, Professor Rhoda Reddock, who declined comment and directed questions to the university's marketing department. Calls to that department went unanswered.

In his address at the forum, Waithe noted that the global conversation and trend on sexual harassment at this time showed victims being supported and perpetrators facing the consequences of their actions.

This did not appear to be the trend locally, he said, adding that allegations of sexual harassment against Balgobin spanned more than a decade.

Clear policy needed

The panel also featured Group Head, Legal and Corporate Secretary at ANSA McAL, Francine Bain-Cumberbatch, attorney and activist Lynette Seebaran-Suite and founder of Women Everywhere, Adeleine Gregoire.



'I WASN'T ANGRY': Fixin' T&T's Kirk Waithe addresses participants during yesterday's lunchtime forum, "Boardroom Bullies? What to do to end sexual harassment", at Lecture Room One, Institute of International Relations, UWI, St Augustine. —Photo: CURTIS CHASE

Bain-Cumberbatch presented an overview of ANSA's policy on sexual harassment, which the IDGS had referred to an one of two available best-practice policies in the country.

ANSA's policy is clearly outlined, Bain-Cumberbatch said and the severe breach of this policy "is cause for termination".

Bain-Cumberbatch said it was noteworthy that persons in or incoming to the organisa-

tion have never asked whether the company has a policy on the issue.

She said this should change and it should become commonplace that people ask about such infrastructure as easily as they ask about other job-related policies.

"This is a defining moment for T&T," Bain-Cumberbatch said.

"We need to seize the opportunity to keep this matter topical".