

Demands of the Trade Union Leadership

It has been the norm for trade unions to follow some traditions in the way they engage in the industrial relations practice. Based on new trending behaviours the status quo of these norms have now become the subject of challenge. It is to be expected that change is a constant factor but it can also be conceded that change must be justified and not part of a reactionary process.

The labour movement is known to identify with the value system of the society. This means that the movement concerns itself with what is desirable and undesirable, acceptable and non-acceptable. Given that the value system is tied to societal norms, then there is the expectation that the trade union organization and its leadership would appreciate the importance of observing standards. Since the leadership plays a defining role in creating the vision which guides and directs the organization, the leaders should be mindful of the fact that it will be judged both individually and collectively. Leaders should be cognizant that judgment will be based on an examination of their individual characteristics and behaviour.

Given that a trade union is not a one man show, it is also important for individual leaders to understand the extent of their role, and to recognize that collective responsibility remains the principal feature of any organization where the democratic system prevails. For those who have dominant personalities, chances are that some may emerge as charismatic leaders. The supposition is made that these are intelligent leaders who should recognize the boundaries which they enjoy; and come to grips with the fact that the membership they serve should never be taken for granted. In putting this into perspective the point is to be reinforced that the democratic leader clearly understands that there is no organization without its people.

Following on this, trade union leaders should respect the fact that they are performing the role as the mouth piece for the membership they represent. It can be offensive to the membership when the leadership operates in a high handed manner, by failing to consult or requiring the membership to rubber stamp or approve decisions taken after the fact. Where this occurs it can be argued that the membership may have a legitimate cause for concern. However, this concern

may be nullified where there is a seeming lack of interest shown by the membership in emerging issues, and participation in the decision making process, through the lack of attendance to meetings convened, then grounds for concerns have little validity.

Over and above everything else, it is expected that the trade union leadership would provide high quality representation. Today's workers quite understand the traditional role of the trade union in protecting workers rights, welfare and fighting for improved conditions of service. However the leadership is increasingly required to respond to the demands to fight against practices which promote nepotism and corruption. The purpose of this is to ensure that qualified and deserving persons based on years of job experience are treated fairly and without prejudice in the recruitment and promotion process.

Workers have come to accept that trade unions cannot escape the bug of politics, as they have a part to play in influencing political decision making and the formulation of new labour and social legislation. The individual trade union membership is however tending to part from any association with partisan politics, as it often proves to be divisive and contentious. There is more an inclination to move towards the promotion of the independence of the trade union, so as to ensure that it can mount any challenge that is desirable without reservation.

With the pressure mounting on trade unions to maintain their relevance, there is the demand for a return to the first principle of the organizing of workers. Hence there is a need for the heightened presence of the trade union in the workplace and general work environment. This means greater attention has to be paid to the visibility of trade unions. It requires that emphasis would be placed on marketing, promotion, communication, education and awareness.

With global competitiveness, neo-colonialism, liberalization and privatization all growing factors in the labour environment, there should also be a recognition of the impact of these on the labour market, As a consequence trade unions are required to reassess the role they are required to play in the promotion of worker productivity and efficiency.

The cementing of the labour unions under the umbrella of a national trade union centre now has to be a part of the new thinking of trade union leaders. The idea of going solo is fast losing currency. If the labour movement is to successfully make a difference in any transformation in the society which is characterized by many evolving national development issues, then it demands that there is a consolidation of labour.