

Issues and Weaknesses

It is customary that organized labour has had to deal with the issues of increasing wages, addressing the issues of the rising cost of living and its impact on improving the standard of living of working class people, ensuring that safe working conditions exist, increasing benefits for both workers and their families, and engaging in the collective bargaining process on the behalf of workers. Over and above these, labour unions have placed emphasis on agitating and lobbying for change, negotiating for workers, defending, protecting and promoting workers' rights and freedoms.

The issues now confronting labour in 2023 and beyond, appear to be very challenging for trade unions to address. Inasmuch that trade union solidarity makes a big difference to its response in getting issues addressed and resolved, the decline in union membership becomes problematic for labour unions. It poses a challenge if there are to maintain their strong presence in the workplace in organizing and representing the interests of workers. The implications of this, is that trade unions can possibly lose ground when it comes to engaging in the collective bargaining process at the workplace. This would come about if the individual trade union no longer represents a 50+1 percent of workers at the workplace. Employers are likely to relish this development, as they can now ignore trade unions and engage in unfair and unscrupulous practices. This assumption is based on their awareness that they are unlikely the face the threat of industrial protest action from employees.

Labour has to face the reality that technology is contributing to the displacement of workers from traditional jobs. Other emerging consequences would be the reduction in wages and the introduction of remote working. Invariably, in some instances there are enforced changes to conditions of service. It is for the labour movement to take time to examine why these factors are constraining its ability to exercise the strength for which it is traditionally known. The research shows that trade union rivalry brought about by the existence of a multiplicity of trade unions, presents a major problem. It has been determined that this can serve to undermine trade union solidarity.

It is unthinkable that trade unions which are supposed to be fighting common causes, would resort to competing amongst each other for membership enrollment. It is even inconceivable that trade unions would opt not to consolidate themselves under the umbrella of a national trade union centre or a confederation. It would also alarming if trade unions allowed themselves to be compromised by virtue of accepting gifts of deeds from any government of the day. The hope is that such thoughts would not be entertained, as these can contribute to a push back on the pressures which labour can collectively bring to bear, in driving the political directorate to hear and address concerns and issues.

As a direct offshoot of this, emerges the disunity which exists amongst workers. Workers are much a part of the existing problems facing today's labour movement. Workers must understand that the lack of interest and inactive participation in the life and activities of trade unions, do little to strengthen, advance the agenda and work of trade unions. It is understandable that much of this internal division may be attributed to the loss of confidence in the leadership of the individual trade union. With the survival of labour unions now under threat based on their membership shortfall and limited financial resources that are available to them, it requires that serious attention is paid to addressing membership recruitment policies. It will not help the trade unions cause, should they adopt a policy of aligning themselves with individual political parties. Nothing can be more damaging to the collective efforts of the labour movement than to create a platform for political rivalries to take root.

If genuine change is to come about, there must be a commitment by labour unions to come together and to seriously address the challenges that face the movement today. These are globalization and international competition, technological changes, demographic changes through migration and an ageing workforce; technological changes that include automation and climate change. Trade unions must respond to the shift from the traditional employment sectors. For example, the once dominant manufacturing sector is now being overtaken by the service industry. With the emergence of the informal economy and the third sector, the emphasis is now on the outsourcing of jobs and engaging in contract employment. These are some of the emerging issues that must be addressed, if trade unions are to maintain their ability to organize and service workers.

In summary, trade unions are left with the challenge of cleaning up their tarnished reputations, paying serious attention to changes in the labour force and labour market conditions, maintaining vigilance against any restrictive laws that are intended to limit the influence of labour unions, maintaining membership unity and staying free from political influence.