

Managing Protest Action

The right of workers to withdraw their labour, is generally accepted and promoted. The withdrawal of labour is an ultimate step to be taken by employees when it is determined that there is a breakdown in the communication and negotiations between them and the employer. When protest action is contemplated by trade union members at a workplace, it is expected that this would be undertaken subject to discussion with the leadership of the union. This is what is expected where workers are organized by the trade union.

This makes for a fundamental difference between any actions taken by employees who are organized under a trade union, as opposed to those who are unorganized. Unorganized workers hold no membership with a trade union body, and hence their actions make be deemed as unsanctioned. Accepting that trade unions can only call on their members to take industrial action, it is fair to conclude that when this happens, it is with the approval of the majority of the membership, or those members at a workplace where there is an issue. Whereupon that there is no sanction given by the trade union, or where the majority of employees at a workplace are not supportive of strike, then the term 'wild cat strike' may apply.

Unionized members who organize or participate in the so called wild cat strike, can be accused of acting in a contemptuous manner. Basically, by their actions, they are showing no respect or regard for the union's leadership.

Trade unions ought to trigger the process in addressing and resolving industrial relations matters by pressing employers to engage in the negotiation, collective bargaining and dispute resolution process. The success to be had in the engagement of these processes, is much dependent on the leadership that is provided. There must be a clear understanding by the trade union leadership of the strength that trade union organizing plays, in attaining any success to be achieve. If this point is missed, then it is clear that there is a serious misunderstanding or a demonstration of ignorance, as to why trade union solidarity is critical in the promotion, agitation and negotiation exercise, to addressing the concerns or grievances of workers.

Leadership in any organization is meant to provide the guidance necessary when it comes to collective action. The membership of trade unions and in particular those employees at a workplace who are experiencing workplace issues, should be made aware of the procedures to be followed when contemplating industrial protest action. Workers ought to understand and respect the fact that guidance should first be sought from their representative trade union body. Putting the cart before the horse, more often than not, is a recipe for disaster. There is much wisdom in the adage of, 'to fail to plan is to plan to fail.'

Today's trade union leadership must work towards creating procedures to resolve industrial disputes. This process should start with a greater level of communication with the membership, both collectively and with employees at various workplaces. Where there is an apparent disconnect between the union leadership and its membership, the question of the quality of representation comes to the fore. This is not good for the trade union leadership, as it brings with it a signal of a loss of confidence in it by the membership. It makes good sense for trade union

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leaders to be proactive in the management of the issues effecting employees at any workplace. To some it may seem odd that trade union leaders would make their presence felt after workers resorted to taking action to address their concern, to give the assurance that the matters are being addressed. Trade union leaders should therefore work to ensure that they cannot be justifiably accused of failing to communicate, in much the same way that this accusation has been levied at management.

Reflecting on yesteryear, trade unions benefitted from having shop stewards in workplaces. These were trained and so played an effective role in the communication between the employees, management and the trade union leadership. This is an area that needs attention for the purpose of improving on the communication between the leadership and membership. Going forward, labour leaders should resign themselves to doing more work in the trenches and to having a higher level of visibility. They must appear to be on top of things, rather than leaving the public to believe that they are being jumped when workers contemplate or take industrial action. Trade union leaders are advised that it is best not to be accused of being reactionary, but rather to be credited for being proactive.