

Politics and the Trade Union Divide

Politics is a phenomenon which is known to have an impact on almost every aspect of life in the society. Most civil society organizations are unlikely to escape the accusation of having some political association. Since we live in an imperfect world, the trade union movement is unlikely to escape being captured in the embrace of having some association with or preference for a particular political party; if only for its actions, policies and decision making, from which the working class people stand to benefit.

Within the trade union movement, the point of departure comes where individual leaders tend to use their own political persuasion and connections, to champion whatever causes they are pursuing. It is not uncommon for the leadership of some organization to operate under the guise that by virtue of their election to office, they have been entrusted to make decisions on behalf of the membership. In this way it would appear that they are thinking and acting in like manner of the elected politicians.

It is interesting that those leaders who behave in such a manner, are usually vocal when an opposition party forms the government of the day. They criticize every possible thing. They bombard the media with calls for change and move to mobilize forces to demonstrate at every beck and call. Sadly they show their political preference when they accommodate the participation of leadership of a political party in public trade union arranged protest marches. This happens all around the world. It is a clear demonstration of the power of the political influence.

It is a pity that these same leaders take to being silent when the political party of their choice forms the government of the day. This behaviour is even harder to accept when public opinion suggest that some of the actions of a government as unacceptable, inconsiderate and do not redound to the benefit of workers and working class people. This includes the marginalization of trade unions, and what appears to be support for the division of trade unions, rather than the unification of the labour movement.

Trade union leaders who opt to identify with or support a political party, and more so the government of the day, should be aware that there are directly contributing to the fragmentation and weakening of the collective voice of labour. With this in mind, it left to beg the question...What is it that those who engage in this kind of behaviour expect to achieve? It is about the achievement of the labour agenda or is it about self-aggrandizement? While this might appear to be a tough question, it should not be seen as an intent to impute an improper motive on the part of any individual.

Should the membership adopt a hands off approach in demanding that the leadership accounts for its stewardship and resort to taking things for granted, then there is really no need to complain. It stands to reason that where there is evidence of political infiltration or where political partisanship becomes a factor, trade unions will experience dwindling numbers in their membership, become weakened and divided. Those who are conscious of what these developments mean for maintaining the viability,

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character, confidence in and respect for the labour movement, would be the first to recommend that this behaviour can have a devastating impact on the effectiveness of the work of labour movement.

While some may share the opinion that trade unions have been long accused of being in bed with the government of the day, and so it is nothing new, this still does not make it right. Regrettably, despite calling this out, there an assurance cannot be given that it will come to an end anytime soon. It is hard to understand how any active trade unionist could mount a political platform to seriously represent the views of their members, while at the same time, holding membership of the political party which forms the government, being a party representative in the legislature, and being faithful to party to policies and the decision making of the party they represents. If this is not a conflict of interest, then what is? If there is no conflict of interest. It is left to ponder as to which interest takes priority. Is it that of the political party or is it that of labour?

To dismiss the concern regarding **politics and the trade union divide** as not worthy of serious consideration, may just be a way of not facing the reality of the problem. The wise counsel of Michelle M. Russell as captured in her column, 'Challenges within the labour Movement,' which was published in the Sunday Sun Newspaper, May 7, 2023 is not to be ignored. She wrote, "Pretending the issue does not exist or down playing it, allows it to fester and to cause further disconnect or destruction. But confronting the issue is the only first step." (P26 A)