

Creating a Positive Outlook for Trade Unions

Within recent times, trade unions have been experiencing serious challenges to their status quo. Some will contend that the relevance of trade unions is seemingly under threat. The perceived threat to the status quo of trade unions may well be linked to the decline in the membership base, the apparent failure in attracting new members, a reduction in the accustomed vibrancy displayed by individual trade unions, and the apparent lack of dynamic and inspirational leadership offered up in some instances. These conjoined lay the basis for questions to be raised regarding the level confidence which trade union members, workers generally and the public at large, repose in trade unions.

Based on this perspective, it looms large that some will call into question the image, and status quo of trade unions. Some will undoubtedly go further to question the quality of representation which is being offered. Those who share these concerns may believe that they have every right to do so based on the public behaviour of some trade union leaders. Some stand to be accused of bringing internal matters in the public domain. Such action can be described as unacceptable and disgusting, as it can be considered as the catalyst in bringing about a divide within the organization, creating distrust and leading to the undermining of the confidence in the collective leadership. The pretence that these matters do not exist, is not in the best interest of the labour movement. It is questionable as what is to be gained by this or the preference not openly discussed the issues, but alternately, to sweep them under the carpet.

It would be folly to believe that these matters will easily resolve themselves. Where there is the knowledge of what has led to the creation of a problem and the damage which has been done, or potentially could be done, attention ought to be focused on finding appropriate resolutions. This might include regrouping, rebuilding and the restoration of the image and confidence of any trade union which has been impacted. This is where the test of good leadership begins.

Accusations have been levied against some trade union leaders that they have sought to promote their personal agendas and interests over that of the membership. The actions of some would tend to give credence to such accusations. Arising out of this, is the issue of divided loyalty. Where the trade union membership remains silent, appears to be disinterested or is willing to shift away from the trade union agenda to satisfy partisan political interests, there can no doubt that the outlook for the trade union movement has the potential to be bleak.

If the trade union movement is to progress in these trying times, it requires that it remains focus and reassert the force of its presence. It must commence this process by sending a clear signal

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that the movement is united. There is nothing to suggest that individual trade unions do not have their autonomy, but there must be an understanding that it is through the collective will and spirit that the movement can successfully mount challenges and lobby for change. Whilst there is nothing wrong with individual achievement, the hard fact is that collective support is desirable if the movement is to firmly push to have promises made by policy makers and management, fulfil in a timely manner.

Trade union leaders should be weary of Santa Claus who comes bearing gifts. For those who require clarity, you are directed to the comment expressed by the Rt. Excellent Errol Walton Barrow, National Hero of Barbados, the island's first Prime Minister and father of Independence. He said, "We will be friends of all, satellites of none." This should be food for thought.

Trade unions are required to be mindful of the mounting difficulties facing workers. They must make every effort to remove the tainted picture being painted by members that some are slow in their responses to handling grievances and complaints, failure in addressing the grievances and complaints of individual and groups of workers at the workplace and demonstrating a lack of decisive actions. Could this be possibly the basis for the claims that there is a loss of confidence in the leadership and the decline which is being experienced in the membership base?

The grandstanding displayed by some union leaders is not good for the movement. It is about time that the union membership plays its role in instructing the leadership rather than to have those whom they have elected, take things for granted. By not following the practice of consultation, the often outcome is that the workers feel that are not being properly represented, and are therefore left with several unanswered questions. This can be a root cause for a frustrated membership. The call is for greater involvement of the membership in the decision-making process.

The lack of visibility and connectivity with the membership on the part of some trade union leadership, is a matter to be urgently addressed. Those elected to office ought to show a greater sense to duty. Moreover, members ought to raise objection to those leaders who want to usurp all roles. It is questionable leadership when an individual assumes the role as President, Secretary, Treasurer and Public Relations Officers all at the same time.

The trade unions can do without the autocratic style of leadership and the marginalization of roles that are expected to be assumed by persons who are elected by the membership to serve. Where it is that those who volunteered their services and time are not allowed to function, then the individual trade union has a responsibility to correct this problem por haste. No trade union should never allow it to appear that its functioning is entrusted into the hands of any one individual. There is real meaning to the adage of "no man is an island."

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