

Promises and Pledges

The dictionary defines a pledge as a solemn promise. It gives the definition of a promise 'as an assurance given by someone that one will definitely do, give, or arrange something; undertake or declare that something will happen'. English teachers or those who are students of Linguistics, would confirm that these are synonyms. For the purpose of clarity, a synonym is a word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another word or phrase in the same language. It is basically an alternate, substitute or an equivalent word.

Leaders are known to make pledges and promises. Political leaders through the manifesto of their party, solemnly commit to delivering on their campaign promises. They even go further and confirm this commitment by taking an Oath of Office. This nullifies any claim that political leaders don't make promises. In like manner, trade union leaders cannot be removed from the making of a pledge or promise to their constituents. They too solemnly pledge to represent the interest and welfare of their members and/or constituents.

With respect to the individual promises made by both the political and trade union leaders, where does the point of departure come? While it is apparent that they are partners in the national governance framework, the obvious difference lies in the fact that each party has a separate agenda. It is quite possible that aspects of these agenda may coincide or collide, but it would be more than a passing coincidence if the two were to generally share common perspectives. Unlike trade union leaders, political leaders and politicians find themselves immersed in serious competition. This comes out of the quest to win political office, and the right to govern. Working under the cover of a political party, they are pressed to find favour with the electorate. The road to success is very dependent on how influential they are in capturing the attention of the electorate, through their marketing and promotional efforts and campaign promises. The use of the charismatic leadership style is more often than not, the vehicle used by political leaders to garner support. Personal traits, personal qualities and the ability to effectively communicate, become essential ingredients to winning the confidence of the people.

Trade union leaders also benefit from adopting the charismatic leadership style. Like their political counterparts, they too have constituents to serve, who have high expectations of them. As earlier stated, trade union leaders commit to representing the interest and welfare of their members. Since policy directions and laws rest with government, it is left to the trade union leaders to monitor and police the decisions and actions of government. With this being the case, it means that trade unions play an important role as guardian angels. Who would guard the guard if the political directorate and the trade union leadership found themselves in a marriage of convenience?

It can be rather disturbing to think that a trade union leader would find difficulty separating their agenda from that of a political party. It seems quite okay for a trade union leader to bask in the fact of having the right to freedom of association. However, the line has to be drawn somewhere, as the fundamental issues of integrity and ethical behaviour comes to the fore.

Trade union leaders who are usually very boisterous, critical, press for and demand change and action, come across as being sincere. When they suddenly fall off the radar, there is cause for concern, as their constituents are left wondering and wanting. The concern is more pronounced when vocal trade union leaders suddenly become either silent, passive and/or defensive when there is a change in the political administration, and particularly so, when the issues which they vigorously championed, remain unresolved. It is left to be determined whether this is a case of a

broken promise or pledge to represent the interest and welfare of the membership. When it gets to this point, the cliché of a 'promise is a comfort to a fool' suddenly has meaning.

The bond of trust begins to come apart at this point. Leaders who are not conscious can be fooled by the apparent silence of their membership, but should be concerned about the possible erosion of confidence in them. Questions are likely to be raised about the subliminal messages which are being sent. The hope of a better tomorrow will always be there, but it is to be understood that this will not be achieved if the confidence placed in trade union leaders to bring about the change which leads to a brighter future, is stalled by inactivity. Inactivity, along with self-interest and the promotion of the interests of any political party, must not be placed before the trade union agenda. To do so, would be to renege on the promise and pledge made to represent the interest and welfare of trade union members and working class people.