

The Fear of Trade Unions

It is a reasonable assumption and expectation that the trade union as the representative body for workers would have a role to play in decision making of an enterprise or an organization. Beyond the domestic level, the same would apply as they seek to influence decision making at the national level, where Parliament debates policies, statutes and regulatory procedures that will govern and guide the employment relationship in the country.

It is not uncommon to find that many employers do not show an inclination to include the workers' representative body in the decision making process. It is left to trade unions to resort to exerting pressure in various forms and fashions, as a means of capturing the attention of the employer. This is not unique to the private sector employers. Government as the largest single employer is often guilty of its dismissive approach to trade unions. This approach which is adopted by private sector employers, state owned enterprises and/or central government creates some tensions, which forces the hands of trade union leaders to consider and embark on form of protest or industrial action.

With the passage of time, many have come to expect that the idea of exclusion and none engaging of trade unions is not critical in workplace decision making and planning, would give way to embracing the idea of consultation and dialogue.

Research undertaken by Anthony Kerr, Sutherland School of Law University College, Dublin, though dated, revealed that representative arrangements for involving trade unions in corporate decision making was present only in a minority of private sector workplaces. He went on to make the point that even in the instance where the social partnership mechanism was promoted, the trade unions' role in most such workplaces was restricted to handling grievances, discipline and health and safety issues. The point was underscored that only a tiny percentage of employers negotiated on recruitment and selection issues, staffing levels, redeployment and other work organization issues.

This seems to be an indictment on trade unions and the ability of their leadership to offer quality input to management on the development of enterprises. Further research findings presented by Anthony Kerr, painted a worse picture of the credibility attached to trade unions.

The research finding suggests that an increasing number of private sector employers in Ireland, see trade unions as making changes in the work organization more difficult,

imposing higher manning levels and restrictions on production, protecting unsatisfactory employees, inhibiting individual reward systems, promoting an adversarial climate, and making communication with employees more difficult. While this research dates back to the 1970's, it certainly mirrors today's experience, as we fast approach the second decade of the 21st century.

Evidently from the research findings, it would seem that the more things change the more they remain the same. If there was any doubt about this, it is confirmed by Kerr's research findings which revealed that significant percentages of private sector employees, said that they never received information on the level of competition faced by their employer, the introduction of new products or services, the introduction of new technology, plans to re-organize the company, changes in work practices, and trends in sales and profits.

With respect to public sector employees, some may well argue that they too remain in the dark on most developments, and are subjected to follow instructions which dictate what they must do, as a consequence of unilateral changes, which sometimes vary their conditions of employment.