

The Trade Unionist and Politics

There has long been a public perception that trade unionists are politicians. While this may appear to be so, the hard fact remains that trade unionism and politics cannot be divorced from each other. The difference in the roles of the politician and the trade unionist is to be found in the management of the roles which each is required to play. The representation of people is a commonality which exists between the two.

The distinct differences between a trade unionist and a politician are the outlook shared, agenda and goals which determined how they function as they undertake to advance and promote the interests of the constituents whom they serve. Whereas they are both professionals, the interesting feature is that there are no stipulated academic and professional qualifications required for the job. As it stands, any individual without any form of academic and professional qualifications, training, experience or expertise can, through the popular will of the constituents voting in an election, emerge as an elected trade union leader or elected politician to serve in Parliament of a country.

According to the definition contained in the Merriam Webster Dictionary, a politician is meant to be a person experienced in the art of science of government and who is engaged in party politics as a profession. When compared with the definition provided by the Oxford Learners Dictionaries, there are questions which can be raised about the sincerity of the practice of politicians, as they are described as “persons who are about promoting their own self-interest and the success which their political party could achieve.” This leads to the unfortunate disparaging view being promoted of politicians that they are primarily interested in political office to satisfy narrow selfish reasons. This ugly perception of politicians is reinforced by the extended definition given by the Oxford Learners Dictionaries, that “a politician is a person who is good at using different situations in an organization to try to get power and an advantage for him or herself.” Some would contend that this could easily apply to trade unions, where leaders may use the power and authority which reside with them to manipulate situations so as to secure personal benefit.

While nothing can be ruled out or taken for granted, the perception that trade unionists are self-serving has less validity. First of all, trade unionists operate from a platform of providing voluntary service. Given the main aim of the trade union being that of protecting and advancing the interests of its members in the workplace, the work of the trade union leader is protecting the rights of the workers, improving

their economic wellbeing, organizing and representing workers. Unless there is some unscrupulous behaviour on the part of an individual, there are no personal direct gains to be made by a trade unionist in doing what is expected of them in realizing the expectations of their constituents.

In drawing any conclusions on the perception of trade unionists when comparing them against those held of politicians, the fact should not be ignored that trade unionists and trade unions are indirectly involved with the process of the politics of the state, while at the same time engaging in labour market and collective bargaining. The bottom line is that people expect politicians to promote political stability, social harmony and economic progress. This expectation does not fundamentally differ from what the trade union membership requires of the trade union leadership. For this expectation to be realized, trade unionists are expected to behave in a nonpartisan way as they work to influence political decision making. They are expected to influence national policies, the creation of laws and legislative matters.

The strength and character of trade unions and trade union leaders reside in the outcome where they are able to establish a bond of unity and solidarity. This in turn contributes to workers being a powerful and collective voice in their communication to management on issues where there are concerns, dissatisfaction or divide. It is also through this medium that workers are able to effectively mobilize to influence political action and decision making, without compromising the integrity of trade union leaders. The fact cannot be ignored that trade unions are political actors which exist in democracies across the world. It must be understood that the political role of trade unions and trade unionists, is of utmost significance, as they participate in the process of national governance and national development.

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