

Trade Union Bargaining Power

The reduction in the participation of trade union members in the life and work of the trade unions, is emerging as a source of worry to the leadership of these organizations. This is indeed a troubling, considering that the force of the membership plays a significant role in defining the vibrancy of individual trade unions. While this is disconcerting, it should be noted that generally, membership participation in trade unions has either be passive or active. A state of high participation is best reflected in activities such as strikes, rallies and in the attendance to meetings called to discuss wages and salaries increases. Low participation is now a distinct feature when it comes to involvement in the day-to-day trade union activities. This is reflected in the participation in social and community activities, programmes and training sessions.

As voluntary organizations, there is every reason for concern to be voiced about the declining involvement of the membership in the life of trade unions. Moreover, the bigger concern at this time, is the apparent non-attractiveness of trade unions to new members. On top of this, the steady withdrawal of membership is a matter that cannot be taken lightly. In searching for answers, there can be no solace to be had by looking back at the buoyancy that was previously enjoyed, when union membership soared high. Trade unions are now at a stage where it seems that there is a loss of confidence in the leadership. Questions are being raised about the loyalty and commitment of those elected to office.

Trade unions basically survive based on the dues paid by the membership. This underscores the importance why the organizing of workers is critical and ought to remain a number one priority. It ought not to be overlooked that today's union members are expecting value for money, and hence many who are joining the individual organizations, require that the focus goes way beyond addressing bread and butter issues.

The declining bargaining power of trade unions is a consequence of the declining membership and their support for the causes of the labour. The requirement of 50+1 unionize members of staff at a workplace in order to establish a bargaining unit, is not relatively easy to acquire in the contemporary setting. This has come about because those employees who are temporary, tend to shy away from being members of union because of the insecurity of their employment. They tend to cite that there is the threat of not been retained employed where they is an aversion or dislike by the employer and management for trade unions.

The bigger problem which trade unions tend to experience in establishing the bargaining unit in the workplace, relates to the recognition of trade unions employers. In the absence of a Trade Union Recognition Act, there is room for employers to push back on labour union. It is for trade unions to press their demands for legislation to be placed on the statute books, so as to ensure that the right of an individual to join a union, is supported and strengthened by a Trade Union Recognition Act. Once this comes on stream, hopefully, trade unions can assert themselves within the workplace. This is the immediate remedy to the ongoing erosion of trade union power, as opposed to the increasing employers' bargaining position and control over workers.

Some trade unions suffer the indignity of not being recognized by some employers when it comes to negotiating agreements with employers on pay and other terms and conditions of employment on behalf of a group of workers. They refuse to accept the trade union body as the 'bargaining unit' for the workers,

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and would go as far as to challenge the union's claim of a majority membership at the workplace. Where a Trade Union Recognition Act exists in a jurisdiction, this negates the need for voluntary recognition of the trade union by the employer. It is to be understood that trade union recognition is a formal agreement with an employer, to enable an individual union to undertake collective bargaining on behalf of the staff at the enterprise.

With the structural changes taking place in the economy, this has had a significant impact in the labour market. Traditionally, trade unions accounted for a large percentage of its membership which was made up of unskilled labour and by extension, those who fell into the category of vulnerable workers. The change out from traditional forms of agriculture activities and the decline in manufacturing, have significantly change the character of the workforce; thus removing a large pool of workers who were known to be unionized. The switch to contract employment and self-employment has added more salt to the wound; contributing in no small measure to the contracting of the membership base of trade unions.

In addressing the restoration of trade union bargaining power, this solution is to fight against the growing deliberate misclassified of workers as independent contractors. In doing so, trade unions can reclaim their rightful role in representing the interest of these employees, who are being denied the right to collective bargaining and access to workplace protection.