

Trending Issues for Trade Unions in 2019

It is customary for individuals, organizations, workplaces and even trade unions to roll over from one year to another and continue to do business as usual. Those who are more mindful take the time out to do some reflection and concrete planning. Reflection and planning constitute more than a basic housekeeping exercise or chore. Neither of these is to be seen as a necessary evil. As a matter of fact, each ought to be seen as an imperative, as both are critical to future development, growth and success. For trade unions, this process has real meaning, for it helps to create an understanding of the challenges which presented themselves in the past year and provides the opportunity to identify ways and means to address those which are evident. Moreover, the opportunity is offered to contemplate on that challenges which lie dormant in the corridors of uncertainty.

In every geographical region of the world, there are industrial relations issues which are confronting trade unions. Failure to observe global rights has been identified as a common factor. Breaches on the part of governments and employers are in the main associated with the failure to observe and show respect for the eight core labour conventions. The eight fundamental conventions are: Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87), Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111).

Based on the reports from the international media, it would appear that the practice of democracy remains a thorny issue in some quarters. The evidence points to the repression enforced by some governments to silence or thwart the efforts of trade unions in venting the concerns of the working class. Efforts have continually been made to prevent protest actions and strikes. In some instances, protest and strike action have had an aggressive response from the police and military forces. Other countries have resorted to silencing trade unions by way of

Trending Issues for Trade Unions in 2019: DENNIS DE PEIZA: Labour & Employee Relations Consultant: Regional Management Services Inc. (27 December, 2019)

enacting repressive legislation. It is no secret that trade union leaders have either been imprisoned and or terrorized. This is supported by the findings of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), ITUC Global Rights Index 2019, which cited that trade unionists were murdered in ten countries, namely: Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Italy, Pakistan, the Philippines, Turkey and Zimbabwe. The report also stated that workers experienced violence in 52 countries. The report also cited that “Extreme violence against the defenders of workplace rights saw large scale arrests and detentions in India, Turkey and Vietnam.”

Other startling revelations contained in the report on practices followed in 145 countries, included that 85% of countries have violated the right to strike, 80% deny some or all workers collective bargaining, the number of countries which exclude workers from the right to establish or join a trade union increased from 92 in 2018 to 107 in 2019, workers had no or restricted access to justice in 72% of countries, the number of countries where workers are arrested and detained increased from 59 in 2018 to 64 in 2019. Out of 145 countries surveyed, 54 deny or constrain free speech and freedom of assembly, while in 59% of countries, the registration of trade unions was denied.

The report also captured the severity of the attempts to deny workers the right to strike. Reference was made to the fact that “All strikes and demonstrations were banned in Chad, while court orders were used to stop strike actions in Croatia, Georgia, Kenya and Nigeria. Europe, traditionally the mainstay of collective bargaining rights, saw companies in Estonia, the Netherlands, Norway and Spain undermine workers’ rights.

The body of evidence as presented, clearly denotes that there is the practice of denouncing workplace democracy. It also establishes that the threat to the right to freedom of association is real and not perceived. According to Sharan Burrow, General Secretary, International Trade Union Confederation, “From Hong Kong to Mauritania, the Philippines to Turkey, governments

Trending Issues for Trade Unions in 2019: DENNIS DE PEIZA: Labour & Employee Relations Consultant: Regional Management Services Inc. (27 December, 2019)

are attempting to silence the age of anger by constraining freedom of speech and assembly. In 72% of countries, workers had no or restricted access to justice, with severe cases reported in Cambodia, China, Iran and Zimbabwe.” The gravity of this development was cited by the ITUC General Secretary, who remarked that “More and more governments are complicit in facilitating labour exploitation because workers are forced to work in the informal sector of the economy.”

Based on the revelations coming out of the ITUC Global Rights Index 2019, Report, it is pleasing that Commonwealth Countries of which Barbados is a member, are not named amongst those countries who seem to be in the business of denying the fundamental rights of workers and committing acts of terror against working class people. The report identifies Algeria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Kazakhstan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Zimbabwe, as ranking amongst the ten worst countries for workers’ rights. It makes for interesting reading to learn that Brazil as part of the Americas Group of the International Labour Organization, finds itself joining with Zimbabwe, in being recorded for the first time, as falling amongst the ten worst countries which have adopted regressive laws, violent repression of strikes and protest, and threats and intimidation of union leaders.

The fact that Belgium, Brazil, Eswatini, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Thailand and Vietnam have all seen their rankings worsen in 2019 with a rise in attacks on workers’ rights in law and practice, this gives reason to conclude that the hard-line and repressive approach being adopted against labour in some parts of the world is being cemented. This is enough to have induced the following statement from Sharan Burrow, General Secretary, International Trade Union Confederation. “Trade unions are on the front lines in a struggle to claim democratic rights and freedoms from the corporate greed that has captured governments such that they act against workers’ rights. We need a New Social Contract between workers, governments and business to rebuild trust as people lose faith in democracies. It’s time to change the rules.”

Trending Issues for Trade Unions in 2019: DENNIS DE PEIZA: Labour & Employee Relations Consultant: Regional Management Services Inc. (27 December, 2019)