

The Building of an Effective Industrial Relations System

In the 21st century where consultation and dialogue are being widely promoted and embraced within the Industrial Relations practice, it begs the question as to why it seems that the adversarial industrial relations practice remains a feature of the labour relations environment.

There is the contention that through the mechanisms of consultation, dialogue and collaboration, much can be achieved when engaging the collective bargaining process. It goes further, that the mechanisms of consultation, dialogue and collaboration, allow for an improved employer and employee relations; especially where workers are empowered and engaged in the decision making process. The fact of the matter is that in reforming the workplace to the point where democratization becomes apparent, this seemingly makes a fundamental difference.

It is well known that adversarial industrial relations is not a healthy practice, and as such will undoubtedly comprise attempts at achieving workplace harmony. As it stands, it is inevitable that adversarial industrial relations will lead to conflict between the employer, employees and their representative trade union which acts as the bargaining agent. Considering that adversarial industrial relations is a negative phenomenon, it is seemingly best to work towards a harmonious workplace relationship, as this would contribute to promoting a spirit of compromise. It is expected that coming out of this relationship would be mutual respect, less acrimony and a lesser temptation on the part of the employer to treat unfairly to employees.

The promotion of workplace harmony ought to be an ideal that trade unions would want to encourage. For starters, there will be reduced tensions in the workplace, and could minimize any fall out between unionized and non-unionized members of the workplace. Trade unions ought not to dismiss the fact that employers in a hostile environment can resort to engaging some legal as well as unscrupulous tactics which could negatively impact on the workers' cause. It is not to be taken to mean that this serves as a drum beat which signals the call for retreat by the trade union, as it too can resort to its tactical armory to defend its cause.

It would appear that those trade union leaders who practice adversarial industrial relations, proceed on the premise that they must or will always win. This certainly is a false premise on which to proceed. Proposing or threatening strike action is something that should not be echoed unless the trade union is adequately prepared to execute. Vail threats can sometimes be easily detected by the employer who can call the union's bluff. This has the potential to lead to public embarrassment, a derailing of the confidence of the union's membership, division in the membership and inevitably a weakening of the union's position.

Trade unions which engage in adversarial industrial relations practice ought not to take lightly the fact that this approach can backfire, since it could alienate a section of the employees at a workplace. Where management is able to win over a section of workers and use its share power to intimidate non-unionized employees, this can serve to undermine intended or taken industrial action, as these workers may be induced to doing the work of their colleagues.

Where there is a constant resort to calling strike action over any other form of protest action, and the trade union is deemed to have a track record of achieving little or nothing, then this may empower the employer with the ammunition required to fight the workers and their representative body. In a contest where the parties battle for supremacy and where winning or losing can undermine the attainment of the overall strategic goal, it is therefore best for both parties to be enjoined in a harmonious working relationship. Industrial action in whatever form is indeed useful, in that it impacts on the operations at the workplace. The problem remains that if it is not well organized and sustained, its impact would only be temporary. Attention ought to be paid to the fact that any haste to enter into industrial action can have a severe impact on workers. This includes the loss of pay and even the loss of jobs.

Transitioning from the practice of adversarial industrial relations is considered by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as key to the establishment of a sound or harmonious industrial relations system. The ILO views that this ought to become a central theme for governments, employers, workers and their representatives, in their endeavours to achieve economic and social development. Moreover, the ILO contends that minimizing conflict, achieving harmonious relations, resolving conflicts through peaceful means and establishing stable social relationships, are important to the building of a sound industrial relations system.

It can be concluded that the counter to the practice of adversarial industrial relations, rest on the embarking of a relationship between employers, employees and their trade union representative body, which prides itself on good communication. This clearly is central to establishing a good working relationship. Further, the quality of the relationship can be enhanced and consolidated if the parties commit to following policies, practices, processes and procedures.