

Depoliticizing the trade union

The word depoliticizing means to remove from political influence or control. Better put, it means the noninvolvement in politics. Can this exist in the life of a trade union or labour organization? Trade unions are known to make decisions that influence national policy, positions taken by the government of the day, the parliament, the senate, opposition parties, and nongovernmental organizations. This suggests that the trade union is a powerful voice. If it plays the role it is required and/or expected to play, this means that it will have to lobby stakeholders if it is to successfully influence change.

The culture in some jurisdictions such as the United States of America and Bangladesh provides for the association or affiliation of trade unions with political parties. The jury remains out as to whether this is appropriate or inappropriate, considering the possibility of such a partnership. The IOL Business Report of South Africa, 19 August, 2015, quotes a response made by Keith Bryer to the question, ‘Is there room for politicizing trade unions? ‘According to Bryer, “When unions promise to deliver voters, politicians rush to suck up to them. Corruption follows when union leaders spend more time on politics than shop floor matters.” This comment suggests that there are red flags to be raised over the engagement of trade unions in partisan politics.

Based on the fact that the likelihood exists that a partisan political association can detract the trade union from its mission and objectives, it’s debatable how far trade unions should go in their involvement in politics. This is a sensitive subject that should be fully ventilated and discussed at the level of the membership. This having been said, the trade union membership should develop a consciousness of the importance of having positions on national political issues, just in the same way the organization has to discuss and formulate positions on internal issues.

The drawback of the affiliation of trade unions within a political party is the fact that it can influence the election of the leadership of a trade union. This can prove to be problematic as it means that the allegiance of the two entities could serve to compromise the trade union agenda. The membership of the trade unions must be one with the decision to have a political affiliation. It cannot be one which can easily be dealt with, particularly if it never formed part of the culture of the organization. One of the matters to be seriously considered is the promotion of the self interest of the leader over that of the trade union.

Strong political affiliation with the ruling party or government of the day that is arrived at without the consent of the membership is not only dangerous, but certainly detrimental to the causes and interest of workers. There are lessons to be learnt by Caribbean trade unions from the politicization of trade unions in other jurisdictions across the globe.

Drawing on what happens in India, it should be noted that majority of the trade union leaders are political leaders. The charge has been made that this acts against the interest of the workers and presents a challenge to strong and stable trade unions in India.

There further down side to politicization is the impact it can potentially have on union membership. The withdrawal of membership or the failure to organize and recruit new members can always prove to be a problem.