

Understanding the Role of Trade Unions

There is the understanding that trade unions play a pivot role in the realm of industrial relations. This role is generally identified as one of providing representation to employees, and negotiating for better terms and conditions of service, that includes improved wages and salaries. In moving to carry out its core function, there is the basic expectation that the trade union as the agent of employees, would interface with the employer.

In attempting to execute their role in offering representation and negotiating primarily on the behalf of unionized workers, trade unions are best able to do so, through the process of collective bargaining. It stands to follow that if trade unions are to be influential in their role, and are to be more successful in their efforts to maintain and improve the conditions of employees and employment, then the issue of the organizing of labour takes on an important face. This speaks largely to the mobilization of workers, which must be seen as fundamental to the work trade unions who stand to benefit where there is the existence of solidarity in its ranks. It is this consolidation within the ranks, which can give trade unions the courage and strength to exercise forms of protest or industrial action.

Trade Union can in fact meet the expectations of their various roles, where upon there is a presence of a unionized environment. A unionized environment will prove to be beneficial to management, as it would be in a better position to address the concerns of workers and maintain a healthy and stable work environment. In addition to these, there is the monitoring and vigilance that trade unions are performing in executing their industrial relations role. They ought to ensure that all small, medium, large and multinational enterprises in particular, observe standards of industrial relations which are not less favourable than those observed by comparable employers in the country concerned.

Trade unions are expected to play the role as change agents. This they can successfully undertake and achieve, provided that attention is paid to the education, training and creating of awareness of their members. Consistent with its interest and quest to ensure that government initiatives stimulate economic growth and development, raising the standard of living, meeting labour market needs and significantly reducing unemployment and underemployment, trade unions must be in the vanguard in forging policies initiatives directed towards education and training, skills and competencies development.

Added to the accepted core functions of representation, negotiating and organizing of labour, is the political role that trade union also perform. The expectation is that trade unions should collaborate closely and constantly with the government, to ensure the input of labour on all the political and economic activities. As a part of this role, unions

also play a key role in developing labour laws and regulations for effective worker protection. The unions initiate the push for regulation in areas that concern employees in the workplace. They lobby for the creation of laws and regulations and disseminate information to the employees about them. Unions also have to monitor the status of implementation of employee welfare laws and regulations to ensure they are properly enforced.

There is a specific role which unions have to perform as far as political action is concerned. This relates to lobbying and pressuring government to ratify and approve ILO Conventions and Recommendations, and in applying these as far as possible into national policies. It is to be emphasized that political action within the trade unions is to be taken seriously if labour considers that employment, occupational development, the promotion and advancement of its citizens, and the social, economic growth and development of the country are priorities.

Those who are take political action to mean political alignment, or engagement in partisan political activity which involves the payment of financial contribution to political parties, or moreover promote the agenda of political parties, are certainly missing the boat.