

Labour Reset

The lock downs ordered by Governments across the world during the height of the COVID pandemic, created a situation where it could not be said that it was business as usual. The public sector for the most part, lead the way in resorting to home or remote working. To some extent, the corporate business community joined in the transitioning of the workplace, with some sectors embracing the remote working arrangement. For businessmen within the private sector, it was a case of now having to delicately manage the process in introducing this arrangement. Employers in the wholesale, retail, distribution and manufacturing sectors would have been more than cautious to fully embracing this approach, as it could potentially undermined the profitability and viability of businesses.

The reported exodus of workers from the job market that followed the COVID 19 pandemic, may have come as a surprise to many. The promotion of remote work would have been welcomed by some employees, and in the main, those who saw it as a welcome break from the hostile and demanding work environments. For others, it must have been all about the convenience that it allowed, as they saw it as an opportunity to escape the hustle and bustle of the daily office routine, which included the daily commute.

Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, many workers within the public and private sectors were already being displaced from the workforce. Governments were moving a pace to down size the public service and to introduce new technologies that lent to creating workplace efficiencies. Within the private sector, the move was very much the same, as workers were either retrenched or laid off. There was the slowing down in the recruitment and hiring of workers. Former employees and those looking for work, were being pointed in the direction of entrepreneurship and becoming members of the third sector.

Many experienced and trained workers who were pushed out of the work force have opted not to return. Younger workers wouldn't have observed the treatment meted out to public servants, but would have developed a consciousness about the poor wages and salaries paid and prevailing poor conditions of service. They have tended to move away from seeking career employment opportunities in the public sector, and instead, resort to searching out other attractive areas of employment in the job market.

The change from the offering of security of tenure or a job for life, to engaging in contract employment, seems to be more attractive to new members of the workforce. With this being the case, the public service which was once known to attract and maintain the brightest and the best, is now being challenged in more ways than one. Private sector employers are also feeling the net effect of the competitive job market, and as a consequence are being forced to offer attractive employment packages in order to lure the brightness and best recruits into their organization.

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Those who pursue a career as Public Officer, are increasingly aware that they engage in work for a life time, and at the end of the day, basically experience little change to their socio-economic position. With there being limited opportunities for mobility within the public service, the offering of a contract of employment and the engagement of consultants, may prove to be a blessing in disguise, as some workers would now be in a better position to negotiate for better pay deal. The unfortunate thing about this, is that the vast majority of public sector employees are unlikely to benefit.

With many graduates entering the world of work, it is now an even more competitive job market. It ought not to be assumed that with the introduction of new technologies which facilitate remote work where it is possible, that this would reduce the demand for labour on the open market. No business operation can survive without labour, but is recognized that technology will reduce the demand for labour in some sectors.

As the world begins to cry out about the apparent labour shortages which are being experienced, it is the ideal time for those in the workforce who are seeking employment, to seize the moment to press their demands for better pay and conditions of service.

The labour movement must take hold of this opportunity which now presents itself, to educate the workforce and organize workers. This is the perfect moment in time for the labour movement to seek to reenergize itself. The push back which the labour movement has encountered as governments and the private sector players position themselves to gain control over the demands being made by labour, cannot be allowed to continue. Labour must be conscious of the fact that it holds the key to productivity, which is critical to the process of aiding any economic recovery and sustaining the economic development of a nation. Labour needs to demand that it is treated fairly. It can only do itself a world of good by calling attention to its importance. I must therefore impress upon governments and the private sector that the way forward to success, resides in the ability of labour to exercise the bargaining powers that it holds.

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