

Labour in Crisis

Unemployment, income distribution and poverty are three of the economic challenges facing the world today. Along with these, trade unions are being called upon to address the longstanding problem of social injustice. It is well known that trade unions are required to promote and protect equal rights and equality of opportunities. As it stands, trade unions face an uphill struggle to build workers' solidarity as they fight against the exploitation of workers.

The right to organize and to engage in collective bargaining is increasingly under threat in some countries. One such example of this is showcased in Pakistan, where trade unions are being forced to push back against efforts to restrict and hinder their effectiveness. The imposition of a ban on strikes, is one obvious attempt to curtail and disarm the power of the trade union in compressing bargaining rights. In many subtle ways, regressive labour legislation has been introduced in some jurisdictions as a means of reducing the influence and power which trade unions exert. It comes as no surprise that in some countries, existing labour legislation requires that trade unions first give notice of impending strike action, makes a request and obtain permission to do so. This in essence, captures the control measures which are being forced upon trade unions.

The introduction of contract labour has placed a dent in the ability of trade unions to organize workers as they have done traditionally. The fact that workers are removed from under a collective bargaining agreement, provides employers with the opportunity to circumvent labour laws and place workers at a disadvantage where they are denied access to benefits which once existed. Workers who opt to work under contract are more prone to manipulation by the employer. With varied conditions of service, contract employees can often find themselves without any security of tenure and subject to the whims and fancies of the employer.

While contract employment has played a part in the capitulation of union membership, the rapid decline can be attributed to massive downsizing in both the private and public sectors. Government has been known to be the largest single employer and it can be concluded that the trend set by governments in the downsizing of its operations was followed by the private sector. The fact that labour

was not readily absorbed within the private sector, meant that unemployment became increasing high and so has been the onset of an increase in the level of poverty. All of this has placed the labour movement in a bind, and forces it as a social partner to rethink its strategies in working to arrest the forever deteriorating situation.

Having taken the position to promote efficiencies in the workplace through the introduction of new technologies, some may argue the point and justifiably so, that the labour movement has contributed to the current state of affairs. It cannot be disputed that since the introduction of these new technological measures, there has been an obvious reduction in the demand for physical labour.

Following consultation with trade unions, programmes of layoffs, retrenchment and the restructuring of businesses are constantly being finalized. The general outcome is that workers find themselves on the breadline. Labour has the responsibility of ensuring that workers receive benefits due to them, principally, that of severance payment and vacation pay. In the midst of a financial crisis and a downturn in the economy, private sector enterprises continue to struggle to keep their doors open. Labour is forced to concede to the employers' demand to engage in a programme of layoffs, retrenchment and/or restructuring. While labour understands that some jobs will be lost, it recognizes that some can be saved.

This is where the representatives of labour find themselves between a rock and a hard place. They are left to struggle to save the jobs of some, while at the same time being pressed into service to promote the creation of new business activities and investment opportunities as a way of creating new jobs in the labour market. The mounting of pressure on governments to create the legislative reforms and other initiatives that would stimulate and drive investment opportunities and create new business initiatives is one way of achieving this. The thrust of labour's efforts also extends to promoting the training and retraining of staff.

The work of labour unions is made even harder by the fact that governments enter into structural adjustment programmes and are forced into long term commitments with the Inter American Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and other global lending institutions. These developments impose severe constraints on trade unions

in their bargaining demands for increase wages, salaries and other remunerations which workers enjoy.

Increasingly, trade unions are faced with the challenge of the erosion of the confidence of their members and that of the general public. This comes about as a result of accusations made by workers that some unions are not adequately or simply failing to represent their interest. Individual unions are sometimes accused of being in bed with the government of the day or of pandering to the wishes of private enterprises. This dim view of labour unions is bolstered when trade union leaders opt to align themselves with a political party and to contest elections for political office on a party ticket. The negative view of trade unions which is shared in some quarters, is further accentuated when their image and integrity is called into question. Internal leadership struggles, division and rancor within trade unions that is rooted along partisan political lines, the constant washing of dirty linen in public and a lack of unity and solidarity being reflected within the movement, all serve to undermine and destroy the confidence and respect which trade unions traditionally enjoy.

Whilst the labour movement may have an arduous task to complete in its response to managing the fallout from the economic challenges, such as providing solutions to unemployment, income distribution and poverty, it certainly has the capacity and responsibility to act quickly and decisively in an effort to clean up its declining image and restore the confidence once reposed in it.