

Response to New Employment Challenges

At the start of the 21st century, the world has been transformed by a number of game changing events. Chief amongst these were; the introduction of globalization, digitalization, informatics, robotics, and e-commerce. Added to the list has been the prolonged period of economic recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. These have all had a significant impact on the levels of employment and labour market employment trends. As a consequence, the labour movement has been left to respond to the changing landscape and the issue of unemployment which has been created. The problem is extensive, as it stems from determining how to get people back to work so as to reduce the incidence of an unproductive human resource, to that of arresting the emerging pockets of poverty. The depth of the problem is manifested in the loss of numerous traditional jobs. This means that the most vulnerable who fall in the low-income groups, are the ones who are severely impacted. This invariably widens the gap between those at the bottom and the middle- and high-income groups in the society.

With employers moving to engage employees by way of an individual contract, this presents a challenge to trade unions as the traditional form of collective bargaining is threatened. This has come about as the collective bargaining process which begins with the establishment of a collective bargaining unit in the workplace, is now compromised.

This has presented a horror story for trade unions, as a threat to the membership base looms on the horizon. This requires that the labour movement enters into a phase of strategizing, if it is to find meaningful solutions to tackle what may appear at the outset, to be a significant problem. This brings trade unions to the point to recognize the need to undertake a serious reassessment of their role and functions, and of what is required to ensure that they remain relevant in a competitively driven and changing labour market.

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The prevailing environment and circumstances necessitate that the labour movement immediately starts to address some of the emerging issues. There is a need for trade unions to become more aggressive in their outreach to workers who are engaging the new forms of employment and are seemingly prepared to enter into an individual contract employment. Trade unions must now seize the opportunity to embark on an aggressive education, marketing and promotional campaign. Trade unions ought to concentrate on promoting their services and maintaining a high visibility so as to establish and maintain a link with their public. This has to be the way forward and seen as the best alternative to the traditional method of public relations activities which take the form of press releases, press statements and press conferences. While these forms of media relations are necessary and have a place, there is a need to review their effectiveness in terms of outreach and connectivity with workers.

With the drastic labour market changes which have descended in short order, the labour movement should be in a position to identify the types of jobs and employment sectors which have been impacted and transformed. It is clear that some key productive sectors, aided by the introduction of new technologies, have upgraded their productivity. Others, such as the tourism and services sectors have been decimated as consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the downturn in the various sectors of the economy, the end result has been growing labour shortages and a pool of unemployed or underemployed persons. As employers attempt to use this downturn to strategize and restructure their businesses, attention is turned to reviewing employment policies and practices. The labour movement is forced to monitor what is being contemplated and has to swiftly address any measures that can derail the gains of labour.

The vigilance of the labour movement in these times, extends to monitoring the rise in precarious work, a phenomenon that is anticipated during times of a recession. With the expected levels of unemployment and underemployment to come about, what becomes a source of worry is the level of exploitation which is meted out to

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workers and the extent to which they are disadvantaged. The immediate points of concern would be the limited access which they have to social protection and the denial of employment rights. Next, there is the shift in the employment status which can vary from temporary, part-time, job work to being self-employed. The unilateral varying of the engagement of employment by employers, makes a fundamental difference to security of tenure, conditions of work and access to social protection in the form of sick leave benefits, unemployment benefits, vacation pay and the like. Labour is immediately challenged to mount representation to ensure that provision is made through the enactment of legislation, so as to guarantee social protection for workers who are so disadvantaged. Through its efforts, labour can work to organize the third sector, and so strengthen the trade union membership base. This is a time for trade unions to return to one of its first principle of 'the organizing of labour.'

As the problem of labour shortages continues to trend upward, it can reasonably be assumed that many employees who once had permanent jobs, have been displaced. There are some who are no longer working in the comfort of offices, but instead from home. These are factors which will influence a review of existing employment policies and workplace practices. It becomes apparent that new employment policies will take into consideration the new forms of work that are being shaped by the adoption of new technologies, which in turn, drive e-commerce, remote working and the development of new employment sectors.

The fact is that new technologies will be embraced in both old and new workplaces. The purpose of this would be to aid improvement in productivity and efficiency in the delivery of service. On the other hand, employers will for the safety of their operations and as it relates to minimizing any disruption of business, want to maintain the existing COVID-19 protocols; particularly those of handsantizing and social distancing.

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