

The Legacy of Trade Unions

The term legacy is one that is familiarly used to describe the contribution, impact or lasting memory of an individual, group, organization or event. The standard dictionary definition describes it as 'something that is passed on or handed down from one generation to the next'. In reflecting on the work of the trade union movement over period of time in history, and on the changing of the guard in the leadership of the movement, here-in lies the legacy of trade unions.

There are some developments which will stand out in the history of the trade union movement, as these will invariably have a lasting impact on the growth, development and character of the movement. History will recall that prior to the advent of trade unions, working class people were subjected to the dominant control and whims and fancies of the capitalist class. The change and transformation which is now experienced in the contemporary world, is to be credited to the unionization of workers. By uniting workers, trade unions have achieved the goal of making the world a better place for workers, having empowered them to fight for better working conditions.

The unification of workers has given rise to the notion and practice of trade union solidarity. This is embedded in the fact that trade union is an organization of working people who stand together and speak with one voice to generally improve their lives. The direct outcome of this is that trade unions negotiate on behalf of their members. They also play a pivotal role in attempting to protect workers' rights.

The role which trade unions play lead to them becoming respected organizations within the society. It is recognized that they have established themselves as powerful entities which undertake to achieve economic and social justice on the behalf of all working class people. The advent of trade unionism has resulted in a transition to an empowered work force, as trade unions have ensured that there is representation for workers, while undertaking to champion the rights of workers. The successful lobby for freedom of association which today is the underpinning of a democratic society, forms part of the legacy of the trade union movement.

On the subject of the development of a democratic society, it is accepted the key elements of democracy are freedom of association, freedom of speech, and the right to vote. These are all practiced by trade unions in the western world. Whereas trade unions may be described as political organizations, it does not stand to reason that they generally have a partisan political alignment. It is true that in some instances there is evidence to suggest

elements of partisan political infiltration. History will however recall that political parties in the Caribbean were born out of workers' lobbying groups. It is true to state that trade unions are built through the active participation of members, and that they encourage political participation at both the grassroots and national levels.

In this modern world where trade unions have become a dominant player in the practice of labour relations, they have increasingly become a source of worry to the members of the capitalist class. Employers are now forced to respect trade unions and to appreciate the role they play in negotiating for salaries, wages, and benefits and improve overall conditions that impact workers' ability to do their jobs. There has been a decisive change from the unilateral approach once adopted by employers in the determining wages, salaries, benefits and conditions of service for employees, to a state where the trade unions have established and cemented a place for negotiations and the collective bargaining process to take place.

History will remain kind to trade unions by crediting them for having championed the empowerment and engagement of workers, so enabling them to participate in the decision making process at work. Further, for lobbying and influencing labour and social legislation, holding officials accountable for their actions, promoting equality (fair wage and equal pay), non-discrimination in the workplace, promoting a decent minimum wage so as to protect the most venerable of the workforce, promotion of the decent work agenda, and the championing of efficiency, productivity, consultation and dialogue.