

Maintaining Respect for the Labour Movement

Ever since the establishment of trade unions, they have become powerful institutions within our communities. The role of trade unions as the representative voice of organized labour, has earned them the respect as a one of the pillars of the society. The respect accorded is reflected in the fact that the importance of labour cannot be easily overlooked in the economic and national development of any society. It therefore begs the question as to why it often appears that labour is under attack for carrying out its roles and functions in representing the interests of organized labour.

It would seem that the representative strength of the labour movement constitutes the general fear which governments and the business community have of trade unions. Generally, trade unions have the largest membership of any civil society group and so are strategically placed to exert pressure on government in the lobbying of change. From the vantage point of both government and the corporate community, any authorized industrial action by the trade union, whether temporary or sustained can have a devastating impact on business. With this narrow view of trade unions, it is easy to understand why there appears to be an inert fear of trade unions.

Trade unions have had their origins in promoting changes to the social and economic agenda in an effort to bring about improvements to the lives of working class people. The irony of this is that many who championed the cause, have recognized that in order to effect the needed changes, it becomes necessary to enter into partisan politics. This invariably is seen as the vehicle to maneuver into the walls of parliament, where the opportunity presents itself to advance labour's case. History will reflect that this been the path trodden by many past Caribbean political and trade union leaders.

It is amazing that trade union leadership in many quarters have endeared a tongue lashing from many of those who have themselves come out of the bosom of the trade union movement. It becomes more interesting when it is considered that those have elevated themselves either to political office or have assumed management positions either in the public and private sectors. The unprovoked tirade which is usually inflicted upon the union leadership amounts to trade union bashing. This is said to be part of the course of public life but there can be no justification for unwarranted and demeaning attacks to be executed upon the trade union leadership, considering that the leaders are only executing the mandate of their membership. Since respect is earned, it is advisable that trade union leaders ensure that their credibility, integrity and level of responsible behaviour are not called into question.

It can be disconcerting to think that the level of respect for the trade union can also be traced to its base. For example, a decline in membership due to the withdrawals or non attraction of new members is a real indicator of a possible lack of interest, confidence and support for the organization. It is quite possible that the development of fractures and division within the trade

unions themselves can lead to a souring of unity. Internal fighting in any individual trade union which opens the door for criticisms of the leadership approach, can help to fuel the public disenchantment, disrespect and disregard for the labour movement. It is for the membership to guard against being a contributor to tearing down the image that the labour movement presents and which remains crucial if it is to maintain the respect of the society.