

Myths About Trade Unions

Trade unions have been known to be heavily criticized from within and outside of the walls of organizations. It can be argued that much of the criticisms levied have come from unreasonable expectations from members of trade unions and those who view trade unions in a negative light.

Employers are known to see trade unions as obstructionists to progress. Such employers tend to dissuade their employees from being unionized. The general practice in some jurisdictions is not to recognize the existence of the trade union collective bargaining unit at the workplace. To this end there is a challenge to the 50+1 members which is required to give recognition to the collective bargaining unit. With this challenge being mounted, it is left to the regulating body such as the Labour Department to carry out an audit for the purpose of confirming certification.

The evidence for this practice makes it difficult for labour unions to organize workers. The work of labour unions in this instance is not made any easier by the myth that they only represent the interest of their members. This is a misconception that has been perpetuated as the fact that labour organizes for the common good of all, tend to be ignored. It is well known that when a trade union negotiates in a workplace, be it for wages and salaries increases and/or conditions of service, both unionized and non-unionized workers are the beneficiaries of the negotiation package. This extends to the labour union lobby to effect social and economic changes at the national level, which redound to the good of all. This negates the view that labour unions are self-serving.

Employees who exercise their right of choice not to join a trade union, should be respected. Labour unions are not only for working class people but for all categories of workers, be it blue or white-collar workers. To suggest that workers are forced to join labour unions is another myth. Even where an agency shop system is enforced, the individual does not assume membership of the union. It would therefore be in poor taste and unreasonable for non-unionized members to expect that they should share or benefit from the outcomes of programmes and activities which are intended for the membership of labour unions.

Those who sit on the fence and attempt to vilify, condemn and highly criticize labour unions, often do so in defence of a partisan political interest or in an attempt to nullify the work of a trade union in championing the cause of labour. Much of this is conditioned by the narrow-minded thinking that labour unions concern themselves primarily with the calling of strike or other protest action, with the ultimate aim being that of shutting down the country. There are those who take the liberty to promote the fact that any industrial action taken by a labour union is anti-government founded. For what it is worth, this is an inaccuracy and a myth that ought to be dismissed.

The charge that labour unions promote and contribute the lower productivity of workers is inconsistent with their efforts to promote the training and retraining of workers and the promotion of the development of competencies and skills. It is clear that the continued efforts of the unions in promoting the democratization of the workplace so as to support the participation of workers in the decision-making process, is directed at the motivation of workers. This is expected to provide an impetus to improving levels of productivity.

Finally, the claim that unions are no longer needed is a virtual stretch of the imagination. The fact that globalization has changed the industrial relations landscape, there is now a greater need for labour union to protect the rights of workers and to ensure that they are treated fairly. For workers, it cannot be business as usual, considering that with globalization comes challenges to the security of tenure, threats to maintaining collective bargaining units, threats to the practice of collective bargaining and consequential changes to conditions of service; such as the award of individual contracts of employment.