

Is the National Trade Union Centre a Trade Union?

In a workplace, all those who are employed from the bottom to the top of the enterprise or organization, are known as employees. The classification of members of staff makes the fundamental difference, as this helps to define the roles and responsibilities of an individual and/or a group of employees. As it is in the case of Barbados, every employee inclusive of persons in management positions, have a constitutional right to freedom of association. This enables every individual to join a trade union of choice.

Each trade union and staff association which is registered under the Trade union Act of Barbados, has the legitimacy to represent its members. A national trade union centre which is a confederation of trade unions and staff associations, enjoys its legal status as a body of unions, which is charged with the responsibility of organizing public and private workers in all sectors of the economy. To put it in layman language, the national trade union centre co-ordinates and acts on behalf of its members. This includes bargaining with government on workplace issues and matters of common/national interests to the workforce.

For the national trade union centre to be recognized as a legal entity, it is mandatory that it is registered under the Trade Union Act of Barbados. Having established the legitimacy of the national trade union centre to function in the same way as all individual trade unions and staff associations, the calling into question of the standing of the national trade union centre seems to be baseless.

It is important to have a clear understanding of the role of a trade union. To begin with, as an association it shares and promotes a common interest and acts for a common purpose. Within trade union circles, it has been long established that the common interest is the representation of workers. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, it promotes solidarity and works towards the general improvement of workers' conditions of service. In doing so, the national trade union centre as a collective is required to pay attention to the fact that varied conditions of service apply to workers with respect to the contract of employment, wages, professional roles, legal protection and bargaining power.

The point is to be underscored that the national trade union centre is involved in national collective bargaining. Collective bargaining is the formula that guarantees the maximum level of autonomy to workers. The exercise of collective bargaining through the national trade union centre gives leverage and strength as it collectively represents the interests of the workers as members of constituent unions and/or staff associations.

As an individual trade union, staff association or national trade union centre, it is expected that the respective body will maintain its independence. With respect to the national trade union centre, it is expected that unity would be based on organization's autonomy; speaking to workers only as workers and leaving aside their political orientations. The freedom to operate independently, means the exercise of autonomy, taking care to avoid all attempts aimed at interference and infiltration from external sources.

As reflected in this article, there are three key elements that underpin the functioning of trade unions and staff associations, which equally apply to a national trade union centre. These have been identified as association, autonomy and collective bargaining.

For the purpose of reputation and reinforcement, it has been established that a national trade union centre is a federation or confederation of trade unions in a single country. As a representative body and bargaining agent for workers, the role of the trade union centre extends to promoting safeguards for the wider society. The bottom line is that the operations are much the same as an individual trade union or staff association. In reviewing the functions of a Trade Union, it is evident that these equally apply to the work of the national trade union centre. These functions are listed as:

- ✓ To be a voice in improving socio-economic interests and rights at workplaces.
- ✓ To advocate for new and progressive labour legislation
- ✓ To safeguard security of tenure and improve conditions of service.
- ✓ To secure fair wages for workers
- ✓ To improve working and living conditions.
- ✓ To promote decent work

- ✓ To enlarge opportunities for promotion and training.
- ✓ To provide for educational, cultural and recreational facilities.
- ✓ To co-operate in and facilitate technological advancement by broadening the understanding of workers of its underlying issues.
- ✓ To promote the interests of workers with the various employment sectors.
- ✓ To offer responsive co-operation in improving levels of production and productivity, discipline and high standards of quality.
- ✓ To promote individual and collective welfare, and
- ✓ To promote protection against occupational safety and health at work.