

Pandemic Stressors

With the coming to the close of what many would describe as a difficult year, the local labour movement along with other civil society organizations, government and private sector, cannot but engaging in a process of reflection on the many challenging experiences which they confronted, and the difficult decisions they have been called upon to make. Those within the leadership of the labour movement would argue that the COVID 19 global pandemic has accelerated the trials and tribulations which were being experienced. To its credit, the labour movement has seemingly survived the struggles, but it wouldn't be safe to say that it has reached a position comfort.

The biggest push back for trade unions has come in the form of pressures brought to bear by the demands made by workers for hazard pay, the supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the observing of the public health regulations, namely; the promotion of the COVID 19 vaccination as a requirement for frontline and essential workers. Some of these issues have sparked controversy, heightened tensions and workplace anxieties. The promotion of mandatory vaccinations for employees has never sat well with labour. While governments appeared to have been be wavering on this matter, based on fears of political fallout, the business community has been pressing its demand for mandatory vaccination to become part of a new workplace norm.

The labour movement has maintained that mandatory vaccination would be a violation of the workers right of the freedom of choice and a fundamental breach of one's constitutional rights. While this position cannot be faulted, there is no doubt that the labour movement is not conscious of the delicate balance to be struck in promoting what is best in the interest of public health safety. Based on the comments attributed to Dr. Mike Ryan, Executive Director, World Health Emergencies Programme, the movement can feel justified on the stance it has taken. Dr. Ryan commented that, "Mandatory vaccinations should only be considered when the health gain you are going to get from imposing that is very clear and you have tried all measures in order to get people vaccinated. I still

personally think that the way is to continue engaging people and to continue to drive the idea of an informed choice.”

The idea of introducing safe zones is seemingly part of plan of action which governments and the private sector are conjoined in promotion as a measure to reopen the doors of businesses. The measure seems to be discriminatory as it be directed at the mandatory vaccination of workers and subjecting workers to a regime of COVID 19 testing. The jury is out on the fairness of this measure. Evidently, the hard sell is that there are no assurances that being vaccinated or routinely testing will negate the spread or the contracting of the virus.

The labour movement has every good reason to concern itself with the proposed introduction of the measures, recognizing these can lead the enforcing of punitive disciplinary measures on employees, the termination of employees and the violation of their human rights. The development sets up the need for close monitoring by trade unions for the purpose of tracking employment security, enforcement measures by employers and arbitrary actions initiated by employers, that can effectively result in termination, or having workers being made redundant.

Even before the idea of safe zones has become an option, the decision to institute lockdowns was the first step to the displacement of workers. Lockdowns have proven a disaster for the employment of some workers, and in response to this, trade unions have had no immediate answers. What is known, is that employers have taken the opportunity to downsize their operations.

The labour movement has to relentlessly attempted to safeguard aspects of the social protection floor. It is now weary that some of the gains earned, could potentially be eroded by the collapse of some systems. There is the acknowledgement that many who lost their jobs, have been thrown into the depths of poverty. They are forced to take on menial jobs or engaged in precarious work. This raises questions on the promotion of the decent work agenda. What must be a concern for labour, is the exploitation of workers who are forced to work for substandard wages and salaries, and who are exposed to under poor working conditions.

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The problem for the labour movement is the growing number of workers who are non-unionized. Within the current climate, some may question the ability and effectiveness of union to respond to their plight. This may appear to be a challenge, but it can be overcome if those impacted are prepared to join a trade union, support the actions which the union mounts in their own cause, remove all doubts and fears and be prepared to stand up for something.

The list of the stressors facing the trade union movement coming out of the pandemic are but inexhaustible. Home working has become a welcome feature for some workers. Many have suddenly become aware that this new arrangement is not as rosy as it first appeared. Invariably, it has brought changes to their conditions of service, but moreover, it had imposed unwelcome pressures and constraints. Chief of these come in the form of excessive time demands made by employers, which directly have an impact on work life balance.

The chaos which has been created by the pandemic, requires that trade unions identify new strategies and approaches if they are to make an assertive and positive response. This is not the time for hasty reactions, but instead for the execution of carefully crafted strategies.