

The Perils of the Labour Movement

There is the growing concern that trade unions are increasingly coming under pressure. The jury remains out on whether the mounting pressure is coming from external sources or it is as a consequence of the lack of vision, proactiveness and /or the failure of the movement to change traditions, philosophies and practices. The speculation of what are the contributing factors makes for an interesting debate. For the leaders of the labour movement who are charged with the responsibility of finding some urgent answers, if the perception that trade unions are losing ground is to be arrested and put to bed, as nothing more than a myth.

It is to be expected that right thinking trade union leaders would be inclined to review the prevailing circumstances, and in so doing all the empirical evidence and conclusions produced from studies which have been commissioned from such reputable organizations such as the International Labour Organization. Trade unions might want to question the actions of governments which have sought to reduce the strength and influence which have been traditionally associated with trade unions. Some would argue that the breaking of the backbone of trade unions has been on the cards for some time. Inasmuch that this may be so, those who share this view may well wish to question the extent to which trade unions have contributed to the state of affairs.

The actions of governments' which contribute to the perilous state of trade unions are cited in the ILO World Labour Report 1997-98. The summation was made that some governments have "adopted a restrictive policy with regard to recognizing unions in the hope of attracting foreign investment." In addition, restrictions of various kinds and officially sanctioned, or ignored, anti-union activities remain pervasive in a large number of countries as reflected by the numerous complaints filed each year and examined by the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association." These may well be coupled with the slow pace of some governments in achieving the harmonization of labour laws in some regions of the world.

With the organization of labour becoming a growing problem for trade unions, the issue of trade union recognition is seen as a meaningful solution. It would mean that once a collective bargaining unit is established, the employer would now legally have to recognize and interact with the trade union. The fact that this would change the voluntary arrangement of trade union recognition, labour would concede that it can serve as a disadvantage to the recruitment of membership, as the foreign investors may opt not to establish business operations within the jurisdiction.

Trade unions and trade unions national centres are seemingly finding themselves being hindered, constrained and even marginalized in some quarters. There is serious cause for concern over the state of trade union solidarity. There is fragmentation within the movement, occasioned by the fact that some local trade unions remain outside the walls of the national trade union centres.

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To add insult to injury, in some jurisdictions, there is the exercise of the legal right to have two or more national trade union centres. As if this was all, there is the growing concern that governments' have the luxury of giving support to the national centres of choice. In the case where there is a single nation centre, the possibility exists that a national centre may find itself overlooked by the government in preference of a trade union, under the guise that it is the most representative organization for labour. This can be baffling to understanding, considering that a national centre is a collective of trade unions and therefore represents the collective interest of workers.

From an internal point of view, the nature of the problem for the labour movement is real and acute. The issue of trade union solidarity becomes apparent where there is an obvious divide amongst the labour fraternity. How can this be fixed, remains the rhetorical question. The difficulty of finding an answer arises from the actions and behaviour of a fraternity which speaks to unification and solidarity. What explanation can be offered when a national trade union centre which meets all the requirements for acceptance to both a regional and national trade union body is denied membership? How can it be right that individual trade unions can be accepted into membership of a regional and international body, where the constitution of each speaks to the embrace of national trade union centres, while the national centre is denied entry? Since the actions of the leadership places it in a position to be condemned, does this not call into question the sincerity and the credibility of the movement? Those leaders who utter cries of disrespect, marginalization and bad treatment at the hands of employers and government, need first to be true to themselves, before taking to condemn others.

These are perilous times for the labour movement, which now require a deeper understanding of the need for both unity of purpose and approach. It is also a time for the heightened visibility of trade unions. The voice of labour needs to be distinctly heard on issues. The movement must move away from being reactionary and become more proactive in its outlook and approaches. The focus of the labour movement must not be placed primarily on the financial challenges before it. But there must be an urgent attempt made at winning the confidence of the workforce, restoring the membership base through implementing strong organizing strategies, reestablishing the labour presence as a strong and influential voice in the society.

Today's trade union leaders must come to realize that the acclaimed weakness of the internal democracy and the accountability within the labour movement has not just come to the fore. Some may have exploited any inherent weakness they saw for the purposes which suited their immediate interest. Going forward, there must be a will and commitment to put wrong things right, and to monitor the progress of any changes. It is always best to be part of the solution than to be perceived as part of the problem.

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