

Preserving the Image and Integrity of Trade Unions

Trade unions are organizations which are registered under the Trade Union Act of a country where it is located and operating. They bring to bear their influence on protecting and promoting the interests of their membership, and generally speaking, all working class people. Beyond that, trade unions act as lobbying groups and in so doing, are able to influence national policy decision making; whether it is directed at introducing new measures and initiatives or addressing required changes.

The integrity of an organization is based on its having adopted ethical and moral management principles and the emphasis which it places on these, in the behaviours that are executed in the management process. The management of trade unions are therefore expected to embrace the three guiding principles of being honourable, practicing honesty and faithfulness in their dealings. Inasmuch that the organization is expected to behave in a mature and responsible manner, a responsibility is placed on each member of the leadership and management team to demonstrate in their actions and interactions, a sense of ethical and moral integrity. The point should not be missed that the display of ethical behaviour speaks volumes to the integrity which the organization develops. The positive spin off of this, is earning the respect of the membership, as it has the effect of driving their commitment and motivation. There can be no illusion that this contributes to how the wider public perceives and relates to the organization.

It important for leaders and managers to recognize, appreciate and respect that the integrity of the organization is steeped in the observance of the law, rules and regulations which govern its operations and practices. Trade unions are rule based institutions whose governance is determined by a constitution. The constitution details the governance procedures of the organization and addresses the specific roles, functions and expectations of those who are elected to lead and/or appointed to manage the affairs of the organization.

This means that trade unions as voluntary based organizations are mindful of the need to establish a mechanism which is intended to hold its leaders and managers accountable. It is for this purpose that in most constitutions of trade unions, you can expect to find a provision or article which addresses the subject of disciplinary

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action. It seems not to be a regular occurrence that the disciplinary article is invoked by the membership or Executive Boards of trade unions against a member of its leadership or management for the perpetration of a callous, calculated and despicable acts of indifference such as corruption. This is not to say that they have not been votes of no confidence brought against individual leaders. For the most part, the substance of these motions has been based on a divide that is founded on concerns regarding the leader's actions or inactions that are related to the execution of the mandate of the organization.

The decorum exercised by members when called upon to express their concerns of matters of divide, is but a plus for the integrity of the labour movement. Generally, respect is shown for the following of constitutional and democratic procedures. There has been no resort to mob rule, inciting of insurrection, the making of public threats against individual members and humiliation and condemnation of opposing parties. At the end of the decision-making process, there is the general acceptance of the majority vote for decision taken. Where a continuous challenge exists, the ballot box has been accepted as the means towards resolving the issue.

As we know it, trade unions have been established as organizations which represent the interest of the collective. It therefore would be a sad day if the leadership of any trade union undertook to support, incite and/or approve any form of anti-social, rebellious or violent behaviour, which could potentially undermine the principles on which trade unions are founded and promoted. Such indifference will translate in the erosion of trade union unity, solidarity, the defacing of the image, reputation and integrity of the individual trade union. It also has implications for how the wider labour movement is perceived in the eyes of the public.

For the most part, the integrity of trade unions tends to be secured by virtue of the fact workers organize themselves collectively in an effort to achieve common goals. These include protecting the integrity of their trade union, improving safety standards, attaining better wages, benefits and better working conditions. All of this is achieved through the increased bargaining power wielded by the creation of solidarity and unification by the workers.

There is a fundamental difference as it relates to maintaining the integrity of trade unions when this is compared to political parties. Unlike politicians and political

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parties, the objectives set are not driven by promises made and moreover, the broad ideological issues which are supported by fractions in the political party. Putting this into perspective, Karl Marx in describing trade unions, commented that "The value of labour-power constitutes the conscious and explicit foundation of the trade unions, whose importance for the working class can scarcely be overestimated."

It is pleasing to know that the trade union leadership is made up of volunteers who through the democratic process are elected by the membership. The volunteerism principle equally applies to those who offer themselves to serve as shop stewards or union delegates. These are either elected or appointed. With this being the case, any effort to tinker with volunteerism can lead to the promotion of a partisan interest, wide spread political infiltration, the disturbing of the power base and derailing of the influence which trade unions traditionally have had.

Every effort therefore has to be made to guard against the undermining of the integrity of trade unions. For example, the introduction of an application of integrity legislation to trade unions, could potentially lead to interference with the right to freedom of association and the independent functioning of trade unions. This would manifest itself where the law could disqualify a person from the holding of office because of having committed a criminal offence whatever that may be. This effectively would nullify the freedoms guaranteed by the International Labour Organization Convention #87 on the Freedom of Association and the Right to Organization.

It should be that in an effort to preserve the integrity of trade unions nothing should be directed to interfere with the practice of trade union democracy, to determine the trade union's right to function and to dictate whom its members may elect to manage its business affairs. The integrity of the trade union should rest in observance of the constitution of the individual trade union, the ILO conventions and adherence to the democratic principles, processes and procedures.

The level of respect which trade unions should continue to earn, will rest heavily on the exploits of the labour movement, for it is here where the hope for securing the delivery of fairness in the treatment and dispensation of justice to workers, continues to reside.