

Planning for Successful Industrial Action

There is a well-known adage 'that to fail to plan is to plan to fail'. It is basically a cardinal sin to institute any form of industrial or protest action without a decisive plan of action. In developing the action plan, primary consideration should be given to what is intended to be achieved, and what should be put in place in order to achieve the desired outcome(s).

It is to be expected that the principles of good leadership and management would dictate that careful attention is paid to organization, mobilization and communication strategies to be employed, the execution of the action plan and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation purposes. Two additional key aspects to be considered when developing a plan for industrial and/or protest action would be the timing of the event and the readiness of the membership for the proposed action. These are important factors that cannot be overlooked, since they are tied to the prevailing climate. This would include the eagerness of the membership for action, which can be gauged by the feedback from the attendance to meeting and pressure brought to bear on the leadership for some form of action to be taken.

Accepting that the decision to take any form of action is usually gauged by the mood of the membership, it is however unwise to take on face value the mood of the membership to mean that there is tacit support for any contemplated action. It is important that the views of the membership is properly canvassed, as it can be an error of judgment on the part of the leadership to make a calculated decision on the behalf of the membership, when contemplating any form of industrial or protest action. It is advisable that the decision to do or not to do, should rest solely with the membership. As a safety mechanism, the leadership's decision to undertake any form of action should not be made on the dictate of a minority of the membership. The fact that a constitutional quorum is present and voting may be a comfort to some, this should also be a signal that there is a lot of work to be done before making a commitment to take action.

Failed industrial/protest action is usually a blow to the leadership of any trade union organization. It not only means going back to the drawing board but more importantly, it requires some serious introspection and investigation as to why the action failed. If per chance it has anything to do with the confidence reposed in the leadership, then there are some serious considerations and decisions which ought to be made.

In every organization the track record of performance is usually used as a means of motivating and inspiring the membership. Where it appears that there is limited success in efforts undertaken, there is tendency for signs of disenchantment and disinterest to appear amongst the membership. It has long been the understanding that workers have to make sacrifices to achieve the gains earned but this should never be taken to mean that the membership would buy into a plan of the leadership, if the prevailing circumstances and climate suggest that the ultimate goal cannot be attained.

The prospect of success being achieved in any planned industrial/protest action seems remote where there is evidence of a divide in the membership of the organization. The leadership should move to heal any divide by ensuring that it cannot be accused of spreading propaganda, being hasty, irrational, unreasonable and emotional in its plan to execute, by paying close attention to the education, organization and mobilization of the membership.

The use of the media can very sometimes prove to be detrimental to the organization and mobilization efforts. The sensationalism and dramatization given to the planned event can serve to undermine its impact. The trade union must guard against actions that can potentially weaken its cause. It should consider how it can garner support from members of the public. In so doing, it should be minded of those critics with partisan political agenda who can help to confuse the issue and the minds of those uncommitted members, and even influence a change of mind of those who might have been committed or sympathetic to the cause. A judgment has to be made on how to treat to the media, for it is well known that there can be no

surety that the media will favourably treat to promoting the union's interest.

Notwithstanding all of the above, the fact remains that there are no guarantees that any industrial or protest action will be successful. What is guaranteed is that poor planning, communication, organizing and mobilization will contribute to its failure. On top of all this, the success or failure of an action can be compromised where the leadership presents a partisan political agenda, as this can certainly put the cat amongst the pigeons.

At the end of the day, success or failure will ride high on the confidence the membership reposes in its leadership. This should say to the leadership that nothing is to be taken for granted. Visionary leadership is therefore important as this will see objectivity, reasoning and sound judgments being exercised, rather than having emotionalism, insensitivity, narrow-mindedness, ignorance, irrational and egocentric thinking, prevailing over the application of common sense.