

Tactics for the Survival of Trade Unions

In many quarters, the speculation remains rife that existence of trade unions is under threat. For the most part, the quality and effective Leadership which is being offered up, seemingly constitutes the basis for this thinking which is now constantly promoted.

Generally speaking, the leadership crisis which is apparent at the national, regional and international levels is not unique to trade unions. Whereas this is so, it certainly cannot be entertained as excuse for any shortcomings by trade union leaders.

Those who offer themselves for election to office in the leadership of trade unions must first understand what are the requirements and demands of the job. It must be understood that it is not a popularity contest, and neither is it a stage to promote one's interest, ego and image. The choice and election of a leader has to be based on the individual's vision for the organization, leadership capacity, competencies, personal character and qualities.

Acknowledging that the selection and election of a leader starts with the membership, it means that the blame game should start there. The membership cannot absolve itself of any responsibility for getting it wrong. It is a hard price for an organization to pay where it elects an incompetent, inept and uninspiring leader.

While it may be considered as taking a pot shot at the membership for a poor sense of choice in their judgement in the election of a preferred leader, their support for a leader who continues to be embroiled in controversy and who demonstrates poor communication skills, can only contribute to the decline in the standing which the union has in the community.

There is a tendency to pass the buck or find excuses when things go wrong in the case of selecting and electing the best union leadership. Those members who do not exercise their right to vote cannot exonerate themselves from the outcome of the decision-making process.

It is a misguided belief that the authority which resides in the hands of the leadership of a trade union, gives it the right to act as it chooses. The membership must be aware that it retains the right to direct the leadership. This means that the membership has the right to demand that it is consulted as this is one way it can hold the leadership accountable. Too often there is not enough participation by the membership in the life of the trade union. This creates the thinking on the part of the leadership that it can function as it sees fit. The way to remove the perception of complacency and arrogance on the part of the trade union leadership, is for the membership to stamp its authority in bringing discipline to the leadership of the organization. It is the indiscipline of some leaders and disrespect for the same standards, procedures and practices which they promote, that often threatens to call the integrity and image of trade union into question.

It can be argued that the change can come about where the leaders who are elected, inspire confidence, motivate potential members to join the trade union and encourage greater level of participation of the union membership. Looking at it from a positive perspective, the best of the

trade union leaders is usually unearthed, when those at the helm can feel the full support of the membership.

The supposed threat to the existence of trade unions can be eliminated with a commitment to ensuring that the voice of labour remains strong. It also requires that trade unions remain vibrant, united, have a committed and proactive leadership which demonstrates responsible behaviour, sound decision making and is accountable.