

The Marginalization of the Labour Movement

The transformation being experienced in the practice of labour relations is having an impact on the way trade unions do business. In short order labour has had to respond to globalization, the impact of the global financial crisis, the impact of new technologies, the issue of the future of work, climate change and public-sector reform. One common factor linking these challenges is the implication they have for the retention of jobs.

It would appear that this is the most difficult period facing labour since the industrial revolution. The turn of events has totally transformed the way trade unions do business. They are now forced to move beyond the traditional remit of providing representation for better conditions of service and engaging the collective bargaining process, to having a deeper interest in national decision making. The latter is now more important than ever, as national policy is increasingly being driven by what happens at the global level. Trade unions are being required to play a more decisive role in the process of change.

At the national level, the social partnership mechanism has long been promoted as the best means of ensuring that the government, labour and capital work together to find the best approaches to good governance. It means that there is a commitment to have dialogue on critical issues of the domestic economy, the national employment policy, national productivity and the productive sectors of the economy, the environment, technological changes and human resource development issues. In an age when political leaders are expected to demonstrate an understanding that progressive leadership requires a collaborative approach, it is disheartening to think that in some jurisdictions, governments would shy away from embracing the social partnership mechanism.

Even more disturbing are those politicians who having presented themselves as caretakers of the people's interests, would tend to want to be overtly critical of the work of trade unions and by their actions and comments, attempt to divide the solidarity of trade unions. It was felt that our societies had long graduated from the archaic thinking that it was best to marginalize trade unions. Trade unions as the voice of labour are powerful institutions and hence the hope is that politicians wouldn't take labour for granted.

History would make us aware that government, labour and capital are more at ease when there is high level of employment, a reduction in the poverty level, improvements in the quality of life for workers and the citizenry by extension. To have zero percent unemployment would be ideal but in the context of a contracting workforce, it requires a collaborative effort on the part of the stakeholders to find workable solutions. This should be enough to bring home the point that trade unions are here to stay and therefore they must be respected and embraced.

In Small Island Developing States where there is much at stake, it makes little sense for governments not to take trade unions into their confidence. The private sector should also be aware that it too should undertake to maintain a good working relationship with trade unions. It is hoped that the private sector has no intention of ridding itself of engaging trade unions by not recognizing them. This is certainly a problem for trade unions, as non-recognition tends to limit the organizing of workers.

The replacement of collective bargaining agreements by individual contracts may upfront appear to be attractive. Private sector employers may wish to consider that such individual arrangements can prove not to be sustainable, profitable, or offer any stability to their organization. Certainly, the collective bargaining agreement lends to a higher level of commitment, stability and sustainability.

This brings us to looking at the future of sustainable jobs to drive our economies. The private sector ought to understand that there is a role for labour to play in the consideration given towards investing in new business initiatives and the creation of new forms of employment.

It is agreed that the social partners have an interest in safeguarding the economy, the creation of wealth, new sustainable and quality jobs. The sharing of this common position means that there is room for the consolidation of their individual roles, if they are to successfully work towards achieving this prime objective.