

Political Infiltration of Trade Unions

There has been much speculation that trade unions are being infiltrated by political operatives. Such claims have been giving currency by the perceived actions and behaviour of persons who are members of trade unions. Those who are so minded are seemingly justified by the fact that some trade union members are also members of political parties and moreover, hold executive positions within the hierarchy and branches of political parties. The participation of some trade union members in the life of the political party to which they have membership or are simply a strong supporter, is sometimes reflected in the work they do as canvassers for the party during election time.

It is to be expected that there would be arguments on both sides of the divide regarding the rights and the wrongs of an individual being a member of the leadership of a political party and that of a trade union body at the same time. This debate is nothing new. As long as the right of freedom of association remains part of the constitutional rights of the individual, it is expected to continue to exist. This apart, western societies have accepted that democracy is a standard bearer on which they function.

The fundamental principles of democracy would dictate that there is respect for the participation of citizens, the observance of human rights and the rule of law. The participation of citizens requires the observance of equality of political tolerance. This is liberalism at work, as it evidently relates to consistency with respect to the practice of religious tolerance, freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

It has been established and accepted that participation is the key to the role of citizens in a democracy. It is basically a right and a duty which an individual as a member of any voluntary organization is entitled to express and enjoy. It is beyond question that trade unions and political parties both fall into the category of voluntary organizations. The extent to which democracy allows for freedom of participation, means that persons are allowed to attending community or civic

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meetings. What is defining point out, is the fact that an individual is free to stand for election and to vote in elections. All of these are complimented by the undeniable right of freedom of speech.

It is said that in a democracy, a premium is placed on respect for and the protection of the human rights of citizens. Human rights are defined as those values that reflect respect for human life and human dignity, which in turn address the value of every human being. This embraces the elements of freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, the right to equality and the right to education.

The Rule of Law is a fundamental principle in a democracy, as it emphasizes that no one is above the law. The law therefore protects each citizen in exercising their right without interference, provided always that it is not outside the scope of the law. Provision is made for equal, fair, consistent treatment and due process of law.

Inasmuch as there is no hiding place on this earth, those who would want to suggest that they have no political leanings or bias, but yet willingly offer themselves for elected or voluntary roles within a political party, may wish to consider that they are only fooling themselves. It is known that during the time of national elections, many work as members of the campaign teams or choose to work directly behind the scenes. Some are even bold enough to speak on political platforms. It is therefore correct or fair to label such persons as political infiltrators within trade unions? In taking an objective look at this matter, such a labeling might be hard to justify when it is weighted against the fact that democracy is all about the promotion of the rights, interests, and welfare of the individual.

What matters most and is cause for concern is the behaviour and actions of the individual which are removed from being guided by the fundamental principles to which they subscribe. The character of the individual is likely to come under the microscope where there are reasons to believe that the basic values of honesty, integrity, sincerity, commitment and loyalty are called into question. It is almost inevitable that partisan political infiltration will not take place within trade unions. It is for the membership not to allow this to take root, if they are to eliminate the

creation of a divide or a derail of the agenda of the organization. The focus at all times should be placed on the principle objectives of the trade union. These would include the quality representation, labour organizing, collective bargaining, negotiation, consultation, dialogue, grievance handling, workers' education, training and addressing matters related to welfare of the membership.

Trade union members and trade union leaders, should be aware of the fact that the political infiltration of trade unions is not limited to political influence that may be brought to bear through support given to a leader or leadership group. It cannot be ruled out that infiltration could present itself in the form of trade union busting tactics. These are designed to hinder the membership growth of the organization. In addition to this, changes to labour laws is another ploy which may be engaged. This is to be seen as a calculated effort which is directed at weakening the mobilization strategies of trade unions, that can range from the outlawing or imposing of restrictions on forms of industrial relations actions, such as strikes, picketing and demonstrations.