

Trade unions and Social Media

The interconnectivity which the world currently experiences in the 21st century, is built on the new technologies which have given birth to the internet and digitalization. This allows for a faster and more efficient medium of communication. Social media platforms of YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, pose serious competition to traditional media. Through the establishment of these platforms, it means that the culture of communication and engagement with the public has changed. Information is now directly channeled to the various publics in real time, and is not subjected to the control of editors and even the distortion and misrepresentations that the traditional media may sometimes have been accused of having done.

Based on the evidence presented by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRD) of the United Kingdom, the labour movement is fast moving to embrace the use of social media. Coming out of its research, the ESRD cited that 'Ongoing research led by Wil Chivers and colleagues from Cardiff University has investigated the prevalence and patterns of social media use by the labour movement. Twitter has become a vital tool to attract support for issues including fair pay and better working conditions.'

Social media is known to have an impact on the lives of people, and none more so than the youth and young persons. This should help to inform the thinking of trade unions of the need to review their strategies as they relate to the organizing, mobilizing and outreach to workers, if there are to establish and maintain contact with those in the younger demographic. Trade unions must appreciate that there is value attached to the use of the social media platforms of YouTube and Facebook, for they enable direct contact to be established with the membership. This interface allows for the direct flow of information, and positions both the leadership and management to be proactive and to make immediate interventions as required. In this entire process of communication, the point must be reinforced that there is value in encouraging participation and openness.

The power of the social platforms is supported by the fact that Facebook has attracted millions of members in its existence. This use of this vehicle cannot be limited to union election campaign, but aggressively pursued as an information, organizing and mobilization tool, if new membership is to be attracted. Based on the outreach of the social media platforms, it would suggest that they can be effectively used in the marketing and promotion of trade unions. Following on this, it would make good business sense for unions to invest in the use of these social media platforms.

Since the embracing of social media is considered as a positive development for trade unions, the investment in the training of or recruitment of a Media Officer would be monies well spent. This expenditure could prove to be an added burden to some unions, but with the dearth of

young persons now trained in information technology, the unions may be well served with this expertise.

It is important that trade unions have an online presence over and above that of a website. Social networking is to be seen as an important aspect of communication for trade unions in these contemporary times. Websites like the social media platforms of YouTube, Twitter and Facebook operate on a twenty-four (24) hour basis. A comparison of the website with the social platforms, would reflect that the latter goes beyond allowing for a greater sharing of information, to providing for immediate responses to be shared.

Trade union leaders are advised that they ought to pay close attention to the observation made by Jason Mann, author of *Promoting Your Union and Strategic Organization*, who commented that social media can help achieve the goal of union organizing. He suggests that social media is all about empowering people and changing lives. Akin to this, is the growing consciousness that millennials are demanding instant communication and promotion. The use of social media therefore needs not be feared by trade unions, since it can be used effectively in helping to renew trade union collective action and strengthening the labour movement's capacity to mobilize.