

Trade Unions and the Fight against Corruption

As part of good governance, trade unions are known to promote the ideals of honesty, transparency and accountability. These are fundamentals which are to be observed and practiced not only by trade unionists as elected officials but by politicians, government officials, leaders of organizations, employers and employees. The application of a zero tolerance policy to practices of corruption, forms the basis for transmitting to all and sundry that no one is above the law.

Neville Tiffen, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald Newspaper, Australia, 15 April, 2016, made the point that “corruption is not just an issue for government – it applies to businesses, political parties, sports associations, charitable organizations and unions.” Corruption generally is about acting irresponsibly. Usually claims of corruption made against persons in public life, have been directed at politicians. This is not to say that trade unionists have been exempted. It would seem as the norm that the misappropriation of funds is principally the accusation levied against persons in public life. Irrespective of who is the culprit, the losers in every instance stands to be working class people.

The vested interest of trade unions in the fight against corruption was articulated by Bader-Blau, who commented that “Trade unions are uniquely situated to help in the struggle against corruption and to help average citizens see the changes they want to see—and to really believe in”. Bader-Blau went on to underscore the importance of vigilance by trade unions, by citing that, “Where independent trade unions function, there is a grassroots actor pushing for transparency and accountability, checking the abuses that emerge from monopolies of power among a small elite.”

Based on this, there is every good reason why trade unions should support an anti-corruption policy. The guidance for this comes out of the Swedish Anti-Corruption Policy 2015/2016, where the point was underscored that “corruption deepens world poverty, undermines democracy and the protection of human rights, harms trade, hampers investments, endangers good social management and decreases the mutual trust between people and for the society.”

Following on this, there must be a sustained call for transparency and accountability to be demonstrated in the leadership and management of corporate, political and civil society governance. With respect to transparency, the focus of attention ought to be on the shedding of light on shady deals, the weak enforcement of rules and other illicit practices that undermine good governance, ethical businesses and society at large. The fight against corruption can and will never be a cause that can be championed by the trade union alone. It required a committed effort on the part of representatives from government, business and civil society to working together to develop standards and procedures.

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It would seem that the outcry of corruption is something that has plagued the lives of politicians. Trade unionists may have been less pronged to accusation of embezzlement or other crime against the state. Since it is apparent that corruption can be manifested in several forms, trade unionists ought to guard themselves against any possible temptations, and moreover rid themselves of any accusations being levied against them. It is the practice that some employers, enterprises or agencies with which trade union leaders and representatives engage, would a times move to offer some gifts to the latter.

It is advisable and wise that in any such case trade unionists make sure that the gift has only a symbolic value. Here is where good judgment comes into play, since the interpretation is left to the individual. To get around any possible error of personal judgment, it may be best if any gift offered is accepted or received on the behalf of the organization and not directed to an individual. In this way there can be clear disclosure and accountability and most importantly, peace of mind for the individual.