

Trade Unions and the Media

The labour movement has for a long time attempted to maintain a cordial relationship with the media. Trade unions have seen the media as an effective tool that allows them to communicate with their membership, promote trade union activities and generate public interest in their many causes. This relationship may be described as being mutually beneficial to both parties, as they work to fulfill their individual agendas and mandates. As it stands, the interest of the media seems to be directed at industrial action taken by trade unions particularly that of a strike, negotiations over pay increases and in the political discourse and pronouncements unions make with respect to internal political matters and policy decisions made by the government of the day.

From the trade union perspective there is cause for reservations over the fairness of treatment that is meted out to them by media houses on the issues they present. It would seem that some media houses are driven by sensationalism, and therefore open themselves to be accused of overstating and /or dramatizing positions. When this is done, it has the impact of dividing the public on an issue and can potentially create some tensions amongst union membership. This approach by media houses and some media practitioners in the main, can be attributed to the promotion of their individual agendas and that of the particular organization whose interest they serve. The media practitioners referred to are news editors, journalists, broadcasters and radio talk show hosts.

For some unknown reason, too often the pronouncements, positions, actions and lobbying by trade unions on national issues are often creatively linked to the national political agenda. In this way, the media can sometimes be unkind to the trade unions, as the trade union is often being highlighted as being opposing or non-supportive to government policies. Even when the media seeks to give support to the claims and positions advanced by trade unions, chances are that it comes in the form of critical support.

There is a need for a more positive approach to be taken by the media in the public presentations on matters voiced by the unions. It is unfortunate that at times, many matters of import to the unions are never carried by the media, and if they are, there are very treated as non-sensational stories, and placed in a small column

which lost in the middle of the newspaper. In the case of the radio news broadcasts, it matter may get mention, however without any accompanying details.

It would appear that politicians are singled out for special treatment. Almost every public comments whether seems to be deemed as news worthy. It cannot be fair that comments and commentary by trade unions are treated less dispassionately, and seems only captivating if it is directed against government policy, or has the potential to evoke a field day for the media, where there is the potential to push the envelope so as to place internal union matters into the public domain.

Speaking to the issue of being proactive, this is one way the media ought to improve its relations with trade unions. Media practitioners as professionals need to move away from the achic practice of picking up a telephone and calling the leadership and management of trade unions for comments on matters that often do not have any relevant or substance, other than to satisfy the intention of what is called '**breaking news.**' The time has come for media houses to require a higher standard of reporting and more responsible behaviour from our media practitioners.

One would think that news stories ought to have value in order to capture the intention of the audience. Trade unions as public organizations welcome to share with the media, and so it makes good sense that media practitioners take the time to do proper research and investigations before moving to put information into the public domain. It is about time that media practitioners recognize that raw information which is thrown into the public domain, particularly where it is sensitive, can be damaging in the short, medium and long term.

For example, the moving to make public information of happenings within a trade union organization, may only give vent to the views of one party. Where is the balance and fairness? Some media houses are quick to carry comments which may be deemed as disparaging, offensive and said to possibly impute on an individual or trade union organization. This is to be deplored. A retraction by the media house which often comes after the fact, does not alter the fact that the damage has already been done.

Trade unions like members of Parliament do not have the right of privilege to say what they like without fear of legal reprisals. This is known that members of the media, and so they respect this and are weary of crossing the preverbal line. The fear of being sent to prison for contempt of court for making public disclosure of

remarks or comments made by a magistrate or judge is enough to make media practitioners respect the proceedings of the court of law. From a professional stands point, it would be good if the media would move to respect the privacy of matters within trade unions organizations and refrain from seeking out and publishing information which only serves to damage the integrity and image of the organization, and which by extension, can be an indictment on the entire labour movement.

The claim may well be founded that the labour movement is today paying a heavy price for the actions and behaviour of the media. The withdrawal of membership, the lack of interest on the part of young persons in joining trade unions can be laid at the feet of the media. The media cannot deny that it has constantly reported negativity on internal matters at the level of individual trade unions, and have unjustly been levying criticisms at the labour movement.