

Trade unions and Politics

‘Deep political involvement is a characteristic of trade unions.’ This is the view of Robert N Kearney, who contends that trade unions are frequently led by politicians who participate in the political process. This raises the question as to whether trade unions and politics are inseparable.

The engagement of trade unions in partisan politics has remained a subject of debate for generations. It is conceivable that there will always be diverse views, opinions and even speculations on the validity of trade unions involvement in this aspect of societal life. Not dissimilar to political organizations, trade unions are engaged in the process of lobbying, community organizing, campaigning and advertising. By virtue of this it can be concluded that their agenda is one of achieving clearly defined goals, so as to satisfy the interest of the membership. Following on this, it can be concluded that whether by choice or otherwise, trade unions inevitably whether directly or indirectly, become involved in national politics.

It is a given that trade unions represent a body of constituents, and so in order to promote their interests and to achieve desired outcomes, the need for union lobbying becomes part of the course. There are questions raised over the alliance, association or support given to a political party by a trade union in return for advancing the trade union’s agenda. This is known to exist. It is supported by the theory that the association of trade unions with a political party is a necessary evil, for it enables them to achieve among other things, industrial actions and economic goals. The lobbying on the part of trade unions is therefore designed to bring benefits to workers, and this is often seen through the passing of labour laws and other social legislation.

The extent to which trade unions cement a partisan political relationship can be related to the culture of the individual jurisdiction. The alliance of trade unions and political parties within the United States of America is a point of reference. While this culture exists, there is also the school of thought that trade unions are creatures of politics. It can be argued that as an institution in a liberal democratic society, the trade union is in the vanguard of influencing change; and often does so by exerting pressure on the ruling or opposition political party.

There is the claim that trade unions will very often not get much done without political backing. This raises the fundamental question of how far any individual trade union is prepared to go to achieve its ends. The fact that trade unions are made up of a diverse membership where individuals give support to a political party of choice, may pose some membership relations problems. This suggests that caution should be the watch word for trade unions in the exercise of their political behaviour, if they are to guard themselves against being charged as being politically partisan or bias.

Edward J. Fillenwarth, author of the article 'Politics and Labor Unions' wrote:

"It is often debated whether unions should "go into politics"; really, they have no choice in the matter. They are automatically in politics because they exist under a legal and political system which has been generally critical of union activities. The conspiracy suit and the injunction judge have been a problem for unions from earliest times. A minimum of political activity is essential in order that unions may be able to engage in collective bargaining on even terms." Fillenwarth also posited that "A minimum of political activity is essential in order that unions may be able to engage in collective bargaining on even terms."

Andrew J Taylor, author of the book, **Trade Unions and Politics: A Comparative Introduction**, (1989, argued that trade unions are an integral part of the political process, and premises his argument on the grounds that "liberal democracies can only be constituted with free and independent union movements." Based on Taylor's argument, it leads to the conclusion that non-political trade unionism is impossible.

Political organizations have always been a feature of Caribbean trade unions. This was evident in the 1930's where there was strong agitation for social, economic and political enfranchisement. One example of this is to be found in the history of the then British Guyana, now the Republic of Guyana, where on 6 November 1946, Dr. Cheddi Jagan who resigned from the Man Power Citizens' Association (MPCA) in 1945, along with wife, Ashton Chase and Jocelyn Hubbard, established a Political Affairs Committee, citing the need for a political organization to represent the interest of workers. This committee was tasked with the responsibility of educating the Guyanese people about the existing political, economic and social issues in the country.

In terms of what is expected of today's trade unions, there is a need for them to pay greater attention to educating workers and working-class people about the existing political, economic and social issues facing the country. This will help trade unions to be more effective in their quest to pressure the political directorate and hopeful opposition political parties to do the right things, knowing full well that the mass-based support of the trade unions can make the difference between being elected as the government of the day. Rather than holding on to the coat tails of political parties in the hope of getting some accommodations, trade unions must position themselves to be the piper who calls the tune.