

## **Trade unions and the Issue of Race, Class and Colour**

Discussions on the issue of race are usually very sensitive as they are either deemed as intended to divide or as personal attacks. These thoughts can be displaced where it is apparent that any such discussions are constructive and objective. It requires some application in both thinking and reasoning, if the latter are to be accepted and the race, class and prejudice issues are to not inform the discussion.

The issues of race, class and colour prejudices are not known to be entertained in the trade union movement. As a matter of fact, the labour movement prides itself on the promotion of the equality of treatment and on the denouncing of discrimination. This position is captured by John Went in his paper, 'UNEQUAL COMRADES: TRADE UNIONS, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND RACISM, 1986)' who wrote: "We are convinced that trade unions are more decisive than any other organizations in the struggle to uproot racist prejudice, check racist discrimination and help our country to achieve true equal opportunity in jobs, promotion, education, housing and the whole of the social services."

Following on the fact that the trade union doesn't discriminate on class, race, creed or colour, it is therefore fair to conclude that it shares no differences in the treatment of issues that affect workers, whether there are black, white or of Asian descent. This however doesn't remove the fact that there are still concerns being viewed of workplace inequalities being practiced. For example, issues such as fair pay, pay equity and equality of work and work environment to name a few.

It is almost amazing to unbelievable that the issues of race, class and colour continue to remain prominent in today's labour environment. This appears evident in the instance of the migrant worker, and gives rise to the claim that racism and discrimination is seemingly practice. It is purported that this experience suffered by ethnic minorities remains a major issue in contemporary European societies and the United States of America. In the European countries and in the United States of America, it seems rather unfortunate that particularly in the case of the migrant worker and ethnic minorities, these are said to be disadvantaged in recruitment, promotion, work conditions, housing and education.

It would be a fundamental mistake to think in small island states that these groups fear differently. Immigrant labour is known to suffer from exploitation by employers. Some are paid lower wages and offered poor working conditions. In other cases, perceptions which are created based on the ethnic and cultural background, some migrant workers are treated unfavorably. This is nothing new. It is a struggle which was being fought from the days of slavery and European colonization across the world; and continues in the contemporary world.

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It is difficult to understand why after one hundred years of tireless work by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in promoting the rights of workers, that this problem continues to plague our societies. This has baffled the ILO. The ILO Global Report (2011) observed that despite some progress made in the fight against discrimination in the last decade “it continues to be persistent and multifaceted. A major area of concern is access to jobs. (...) Discrimination has also become more varied, and discrimination on multiple grounds is becoming the rule rather than the exception. (...) In times of crisis, inequality, insecurity and the danger of exclusion are fed by direct or indirect discrimination”.

It has become apparent that the fight against discrimination is far from over. The problem remains as to what can be done to address it. It would seem that bad practices are hard to change. The response to this matter rest with the approaches taken by Governments, Labour and the private sector to arrest this behaviour. These as the members of the ILO, have the responsible for the development of the ILO Standards, which in turn are communicated through Conventions and Recommendations. Government as the enforcer must then move to ratify the Conventions and include the provisions into local legislation. In like manner, all parties are expected to recognize, observe and apply the best practices coming out of the conventions and recommendations, in their policies, regulations and practices.

The failure on the part of governments to ratify the conventions and/or to pay lip service to enforcement, and moreover, the failure of all parties to demonstrate a commitment to the discharging their obligations, means that little progress stands to be achieved anytime soon. This is but only one of the solutions to be addressed going forward. *Dr. Nouria Ouali* (Racism and discrimination at work: a challenge for European trade unions, 10 September 2010, made the following observations of the problem and of the solutions. He commented that: “Stereotypical labeling of certain groups and other barriers impede equal access to the job market and affect mostly people of African and Asian descend, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, and above all women within these groups. The ILO also warns that austerity measures taken to mitigate the effect of the crisis “have on occasion indirectly and inadvertently increased discrimination against certain groups of workers” because of cutbacks in the budgets of labour administrations and inspection services, and in funds of specialized non-discrimination and equality bodies.”

Where the problem of unemployment is escalating in today’s societies, it is quite possible that governments will resort to protectionist policies that could result in unintended discriminatory practices. This brings to the fore the urgent need for stronger vigilance on the part of trade unions, in order to protect and preserve the rights and freedoms of workers.

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