

The Vigilance of Trade Unions

The trade union as the representative body of organized labour, is expected to keep watch over matters that are of interest to its membership, workers generally and members of civil society. This means that they are expected to be alert and proactive, rather than reactive in addressing issue (s) that are of concern to workers. It therefore is a misgiving when trade unions are found wanting by acting after the fact, moreover, appear to be ignorant of a development, or worse yet, to be found sitting on the fence.

Through its vigilance, the trade union is expected to protect workers from discrimination, victimization, marginalization and exclusion. The protection of vulnerable groups such as the LGBTQ+ is one such challenge which trade unions currently face. In these current times, there are emerging threats which warrant that trade unions become increasingly vigilant in monitoring emerging developments which relate to changing conditions of work, and to the introduction of new labour legislation. In a technological driven age where there is increasing emphasis being placed on digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI), the implications are that these measures can lead to downsizing in employment. The change to the nature of work and the introduction of new forms of work, are all issues which now present themselves,

Trade unions are forced to actively respond in addressing the emerging implications, being ever cognizant that the seriousness of these developments cannot be overlooked. Given the rapid pace of changes which are coming to the fore. it would appear that trade unions globally are being overwhelmed. There is the advent of public sector reform, gig work, climate change and the privatization of state owned enterprises (SOE's). Those trade unions that are not watching are prone to be blindsided.

It is a fact that all trade unions face the same risks if they aren't vigilant. Inasmuch that they are likely to be tested by both government and employers, they must be in a position to monitor and push back on anti labour legislation,

proposed changes in the work environment that can be problematic for labour, and most importantly, any attempt to infringe on workers' rights.

It must become apparent to trade unions that their active vigilance has to be supported by the communication which is established with the membership. It is also important to understand that there is significance in retaining the institutional memory of the organization, and hence, discarding of all those with experience within the ranks, is not a wise decision to take. It is critical that where the trade union is represented by its umbrella body at the table, that it makes its voice heard, for the purpose of ensuring that government and employers are alerted to labour's position on matters.

It is viewed that vigilance on the part of trade unions is a universal problem. Vigilance is likened to maintenance, and hence there is the belief that no union can skip it without breakdown. There is a value to trade union vigilance. This starts with monitoring, with the aim of holding the employer accountable. It positions the trade union to push for stronger policies, prevent risks to workers' rights, human rights and safeguards the safety and health of workers.