

The Price of Progress

Coping with the growing problem of unemployment, underemployment and job losses through layoffs, retrenchment and or restructuring within both the public and private sector, are among the burning issues which are engaging the attention of today's trade unions. This presents a significant challenge to trade unions who can consider themselves caught in a web having to support policy initiatives that are directed towards promoting organizational efficiencies and prudence in financial management.

In attempting to reduce the cost of doing business, the shedding of labour has become the resulting casualty. The bottom-line is that structural adjustment and business reform has had a direct impact on the work of trade unions, where there is a vested interest in employment and job creation, as opposed to job termination or redundancies. Trade unions are sure to have a deep concern about any reduction in the employment levels, as this has implications for the trade union membership base and activities. This seems to be only the tip of the iceberg for trade unions find themselves having to respond to some nontraditional issues such as new forms of employment contracts, outsourcing, the informal sector, and the drift from collectivism to individualism. These new developments bring into question what the future holds in store for trade unions.

It is to be understood that trade unions play a role in accelerating the pace of economic development. In the current climate of structural adjustment, it is quite possible that they can find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Where upon there is the expectation that trade unions will drive process towards securing a better standard of living for workers through the negotiation of better wages and salaries, improved conditions of service and security of tenure, the pressure mounts on them to address human relations issues, which are being challenged with the advent of new human resources management in the public and private sector.

There is an extensive list of matters which come to the fore and will occupy the attention of trade unions. These include the promotion of human rights and human dignity, workers' rights including the right to strike, social Justice (equality and

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fairness), poverty alleviation, decent work, democratization of the workplace, observing of due process, workplace discrimination and job security,

Trade unions are now forced to deal with the changes that have emerged in the industrial relations systems and practices. One significant change is in the move from the traditional Industrial Relations practice of 'Voluntarism' to that of the Industrial Court. The industrial court removes the scope of collective bargaining and places a significant emphasis on the involvement of the legal process, where tribunals and the process of arbitration feature prominently.

In the changing labour environment, it begs the question as to the extent that the role of trade unions have changed. At the outset, dating back to the 1920's trade unions concerned themselves human suffering, social injustice, and to addressing the fallout from the power wielded by employers in the 19th and 20th century under the capitalist system. They sought to defend and maintain the customary working practices, pay rates and to remove unilateral regulation of the conditions of employment of workers.

It is apparent that the trade union agenda in this modern era continues to mirror that of the past. Trade union continue to maintain a focus on issues related to the termination of employment, equality of opportunity and non-discrimination in employment, status and recognition of trade unions and occupation safety and health at the workplace and the environment.

It can be argued that under the capitalist's system, trade unions worked hard to maintain their relevancy and identity. Ever since the birth of Caribbean trade unions in the 1930's, followed by the escalation of political unionism, labour have garnered support, having achieved the incorporation of socialist ideals in the political platform.

With globalization and capitalism in its new form of neo-colonialism, it would seem that trade unions remained locked in a struggle to effect change. It would appear that they are being called upon to replace trade union politics with industrial diplomacy, and to be equipped for the new era that places emphasis on regionalization and globalization.

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