

The Mandate of Trade Unions

Trade unions, political parties and governments, tend to share one thing in common. They all claim to have a mandate to represent the interest of the people. Trade unions as member based organizations which are made up of workers, first have a responsibility to their members. Their primary mandate is that of protecting and advancing the interests of the members in the workplace. Trade unions as civil society organizations, are basically social organizations that undertake to promote the economic and social interests of workers and members of the wider society. What is outstanding about trade unions, is the fact that they are organizations which pride themselves on being independent of the employer.

Beyond the realm of working to improve working conditions, wages and salaries, trade unions are in the vanguard of protecting human rights, causing awareness and bringing attention to injustices, corruption and unfairness. Trade unions are independent and democratically elected workers' organizations. They direct their energies towards lobbying and advocating. They press governments to improve social services, public services, housing, and to establish a living wage over that of a minimum wage. Trade unions are known to engage in the process of negotiations and collective bargaining. These are effectively used in reaching an agreement on matters, and the settlement of disputes at the workplace.

The mandate of trade unions extends to offering training and advice to their members, providing legal protection and services, if and when it becomes necessary in addressing a dispute, and/or grievance matter. From an industrial relations standpoint, trade unions are seen as agents in promoting industrial peace and harmony. Towards achieving this, it is important that trade unions work towards developing a close working relationship with employers, in addition to fighting for equal opportunities in the workplace. Included in the mandate of trade unions is that of **promoting economic equality and building workers' power.**

For a better understanding of the mandate of trade unions, this can be traced back to what lead to their establishment. History reminds us that the emergence of the trade union movement, was triggered in response to the need to find a way to push back against the exploitation of workers by employers, who back then, operated

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under the capitalist system; in much the same way that they do today. The mandate of trade unions is more or less dictated by their overarching responsibilities of regulating the relations between the workmen and employers. Further, this extends to ensuring that there are safeguards in place to protect the various interests of the social and economic well-being, health and safety, and the advancement of workers.

In examining the mandate of trade unions, the positive takeaway is that it is driven by responsible actions which are directed at safeguarding workers' rights, securing workers' protection, promoting health and safety in the workplace, workers' participation in the workplace decision making process, ensuring organizational efficiency and productivity, equality of treatment, fairness in the dispensation of justice and ensuring that workers have opportunities for job training and promotion. For completeness, trade unions have a responsibility to inculcate discipline, self-respect and dignity amongst workers.

The quotation from the book, 'The Modern Democratic State, authored by A.D Lindsay, puts into perspective what has influenced the mandate of trade unions. "The widening of the gap between master and man, the insubordination of the workers to the absolute demands of his employer or manager, the contrast between the increasing shared responsibility given to the individual in the political sphere, the declining influence of the workers' decision in the issues that affected his economic life, the feeling of insubordination and suppression felt by workers to an increasingly complicated, enlarged and remote economic system." (The Early Aims of Trade Unionism, Dr. Lloyd Ross, The Australian Quarterly Vol. 21, No. 3 (Sep., 1949), pp. 21-3)