

The Impact of Declining Trade Union Membership

The organizing of labour in today's environment is becoming a challenging experience for labour unions. In both large and small societies, the economic downturn has contributed significantly to this trend as government and private sector employers have been forced to reduce operational expenditure. With the move towards improving work place efficiencies being driven by the introduction of new technologies, the consequence of this has been the shedding of labour. This as a single factor has serious implications for labour, as many of those who are retrenched or accept separated packages from the place of employment would have held membership with a trade union.

Any government's retrenchment programme which forms part of a reform of the public service, is expected to have an immediate impact on the membership of public sector trade unions. The trade union as business relies heavily on the membership dues to meet its administrative, operational, training and programme expenditure. In small societies like Barbados where there is already a low trade union density, the severity of the loss of any small percentage of union membership will certainly create some immediate problems for trade unions.

In the context of a small society of Barbados where out of a workforce of approximately 144,000, less than thirty percent is unionized, the significance of the problem is there for all to see. It is more than reasonable to assume that the largest public sector trade union and the larger private sector trade union who would have enjoy an average 10,000 + membership prior to economic recessionary times, and with the consequential impact this has had on the labour market, are now feeling the pinch of the shoes. In the prevailing conditions, it would seem that size doesn't matter. What matters most is labour response to the crisis it faces, as far as the restoration of its membership base is concern.

It would seem that those trade unions which offer a group medical care scheme for their membership, seemingly have a basic life line. This however is no guarantee of security for the unions, as the possibility looms that those who have been retrenched and have no form of income, would over a period of time be forced to terminate their policy. Regrettably, young workers coming into the system and who have no security of tenure may not be too inclined to participate in any social

benefit programmes. This is where the unions are required to up the ante on their communication and education programmes.

As the trade unions search for solutions to the crisis of declining membership, they ought to place trade union organizing at the top of their agenda. A careful study of the demographics of the membership based on local trade unions and staff associations, would tend to suggest that for the most part the vast majority of the membership is made up of persons of African descent. Further to this, the membership base seems to be mainly drawn from the lower level and middle-income workers. In the absence any empirical evidence, it would appear that there is limited membership drawn from the white and East Indian races. This raises some questions as to why the members of these communities are not seemingly featured in the membership base of the local labour movement. Maybe the time is right for trade unions to identify a specific set of recruitment strategies which target workers in these groups.

In the face of this adversity of declining membership trade union must place attention of promoting a positive image of themselves, if they are to attract new workers and maintain the confidence of those who are having doubts and concerns.

Unions should be concern about the perception that people have of them, which include a poor public image, being inefficient, non-aggressive in their representation and the portrayal of signs of political bias. New members are unlikely to be attracted where these concerns are deemed not to have any legitimacy, and worse yet, if any suggestion of embezzlement and bribery by union official was allowed to have currency.