

The Aftermath of an Election

Following the formation of a government after balloting in a general election, there is always the euphoria and heightened air of expectancy on the part of the electorate. On one side of the coin, there is the eagerness of the elected administration to immediately get to work in delivering on campaign promises; while on the other the electorate waits with bated breath to see implementation of policies, programmes and initiatives. There is usually a sense on the part of the electorate that things would happen in short order. This is seeming arrived at without taking into consideration that the new administration has to organize itself and fine tune its plans based on briefings provided and research undertaken, before moving to the stage of implementation and operationalization.

Where there is a change in the leadership of the trade union, the occasion demands that the new Executive Board or Council has to familiarize itself with the agenda of the individual trade union and thereafter continue to address the issues of the day. These tend to include policy matters, grievances, negotiation and collective bargaining issues. Unlike the political parties in a general election, trade unions are generally not in the business of making manifesto promises. The incoming leadership more concerns itself with addressing the demands of the membership, improving the level of representation, improving membership services, providing training and development opportunities and executing mandates which might have been given by the general body. This is invariably different to what is expected of the political party, since the latter is required by the mandate of the people to implement manifesto pledges which in the main are directly concerned with addressing the national interests. Trade unions are expected to advance the interest of its members while at the same time ensuring that the policies and actions of the government are not detrimental to the interest of workers and working class people.

Apart from playing a representative and lobbying role, trade unions are required to perform a watch dog role over the work and actions of the government. There are two aspects to this. Firstly, there is the need to maintain vigilance while at the same time be prepared to flex muscles if need be. Secondly, it is important that monitoring and evaluation systems are readily engaged for the specific purpose of reviewing the relevance of policies and actions which are introduced and implemented, and to gauge their effectiveness. While the role of the trade union differs from that of a Parliamentary opposition, the oversight role it plays remains crucial to keeping a government focus. Through the medium of intense lobbying,

the trade union can bring significant pressure to bear on a government whose policies, actions and initiatives are counter prevailing to the interest of labour and the society at large.

Trade unions have the tendency to embrace signals of positive change. History would show that they are however quick to react where the actions of the government of the day are inconsistent and where the evidence points to a renegeing on pledges and commitments made. Governments all over the world are not oblivious to the power and influence which trade unions have and can exert. It is with this in mind that governments adopt the strategy of securing the confidence of trade unions. The process of engagement through consultation and dialogue are the principal methods used. Governments should not be oblivious to the fact that there is no comfort zone and that trade unions should not be taken for granted.

Wise and prudent trade union leadership will always be weary of pandering to the political directorate. This does not mean that trade unions shouldn't undertake to work collaboratively with government in advancing the national agenda. The optimism of lasting and cordial relationship between government and trade unions is farfetched, for where austerity measures prevail and where there are areas of divide and dissatisfaction, it is at that time that disenchantment sets in and the venom of the trade union is brought to bear. Governments can expect a strong response from labour where its actions are construed to be anti worker, repressive or stagnating in whatever form.