

Guiding Principles of Trade Unionism

It is expected that any discussion on the features and characteristics of trade unionism, will center on the principles governing unionism. It is common knowledge that trade unionism is founded on unity of purpose, strength and understanding of the membership of trade unions. As an extension to this there are a number of other key fundamentals that have to be included. Akin to these fundamentals principles is the fact that trade unions are voluntary organizations of workers and/or employers. These are established for the sole purpose of promoting and protecting the interest of their members.

Following on this, there is a clear expectation that the trade union as a members' organization would reflect democratic ownership. This means that it should operate on the principle that each member has the right to participate in the life of the organization, which includes freedom of expression or conscience and the right to vote. This in the main speaks to the principles of equality and fairness. It is to be underlined that as a members' organization, the final decision making process lies within the hands of the membership, and not unilaterally in the hands of an elected Executive Board or Council. This having been said, the elected Executive Board or Council is entrusted to make decisions on the behalf of the membership, but this does not mean that these cannot be overturned or rescinded by the general body.

Associated with the discussion on the democratic ownership, is the leadership and management of the organization. It places a demand on the leadership to act responsibly, and in so doing reflect accountability, transparency, inclusivity and equality in the exercise of their roles in leading the agenda and executing the mandates of the organization. The significance of this is that there should be respect shown for the wishes of the members, and there ought to be an absence of dictatorial and arrogance in the behavior and performance of the leadership.

One thing that remains paramount is the autonomy of the individual trade union organization. The fact is that it retains the status of an independent body. There can be no threat to the organization determining what is best for it and how it will go about promoting, protecting and preserving its agenda, as well as specific aspects of its philosophy and policies.

It is important to know that part of the remit of the trade union is the call to political action. This political action moves beyond the limits of the internal electoral process to the national political level, where the trade union can play a decisive role by influencing the national decision making process. It need not be the case that trade unions are directly linked to partisan politics, but the collective nature of the membership is powerful enough

to influence the political directorate to listen and to move to bring about change. This leads to the point that trade unions are reformist in nature. This is critical as it is about effecting meaningful change.

Beyond the decisive role which the trade union plays in national decision making, it is saddled with that of undertaking the role as watch dog, so as to ensure that there is oversight of governance issues, systems and practices which are engaged. Where trade unions enter the partisan political fray, this can raise some serious red flags, including that of who shall guard the guards.

Apart from the issues raised, there are some other more localized concerns that beg the question of transparency, fairness and responsible behavior. To begin with, the leadership of trade unions should consider whether poaching of membership by one trade union to another is ethical, fair and just. Should this be promoted or encouraged? Is it a transgression or simply an act of providing comfort?

The public humiliation of one trade union by another other and/or its leadership is a serious violation of the principle of unity. This like the poaching of members, and other forms of undermining, will not speak volumes to the integrity of the labour movement, but will serve to divide rather than to unite.

One good way to get around this is to accept the rules and regulations of the individual organization and affiliated body, and to refrain from being disrespectful by choosing to be openly and publicly critical of the domestic or affiliated organization, dragging internal matters into the public domain, and failing to honour obligations to which a commitment has been made. It is important for leaders to remember that trade unionism is about collectivity and not individualism.