

The Withdrawal of Labour

The taking of industrial action by a trade union or staff association is usually viewed by most to be a strike. This is so since they have come to believe that any work stoppage constitutes a strike. This in itself is a narrow minded perspective as to what is conceived as industrial action. For the purpose of clarity, it is best to explain what is meant by industrial action.

Steps such as a strike or work to rule that workers of a firm may take to enforce their demands or to press the addressing of their grievances, has been cited as one working definition. According to 'Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia,' industrial action refers collectively to any measure taken by trade unions or other organized labour meant to reduce productivity in a workplace. The point is further made that quite often it is used and interpreted as a euphemism for strike or mass strike, but the scope is much wider. Industrial action may take place in the context of a labour dispute or may be meant to effect political or social change. Specifically industrial action may take the form of a strike, go-slow, work to rule, overtime ban, sit in, sick out and picketing of the workplace.

It is common knowledge that employees at the workplace have the right to withdraw their labour. The manner in which it is done may raise questions, inasmuch that they are established procedures or protocols under the industrial relations practice which are expected to be observed. The declaring of an industrial relations dispute by the trade union which represents the workers is a courtesy that is should be extended to the employer. While this is so, it has to be recognized that the decision to withdraw labour might be forced as a consequence of the prevailing circumstances. There are those who will find every reason to condemn a particular action, but it can well be argued that those who do so are often not privy to the facts.

Usually the decision to withdraw labour is not done in a hasty and irresponsible manner. Generally, it comes after efforts have been made to get the employer and/or management to address a grievance, complain or complete a protracted negotiation exercise. Those who sit in the corridors and criticise, are certainly not acting fairly, when they question the actions of workers to stand up for their rights and/or to have justice served.

Industrial action in whatever form it takes is not something that is encouraged for the sake of doing so. Unions are mindful of the consequences that workers can face when

they withdraw their labour. It is for this reason that union act in a responsible manner when taking such an important decision. It would seem that workers' withdrawal of labour to draw attention and to get redress to a protracted matter, must have merit. How else are workers expected to press their demands, if all efforts at dialogue, consultation and negotiation are not bearing fruit.

Taking industrial action is not only about being responsible, but also about taking a position that is considered reasonable and appropriate. A fitting case in point can be cited where the manager takes a unilateral decision to terminate an employee for what is considered an alleged infraction without undertaking an investigation, or following due process. Is it wrong for that employee's colleague to take a stance in support of what they see is an injustice? Can it be wrong for employees to take a stance against a manager who displays a dictatorial style of leadership and is condescending to his subordinates? How much can anyone expect employees in any such environment to take? Rational thinking would lead to the conclusion that these workers are quite unlikely to be motivated and productive.

It is unimaginable that any industrial action taken will not lead to some fall out. If it does not lead to some disruption, it basically is a failure and a waste of time. This is not to say that it is unjustified and or unwarranted. It can only be concluded that those who cry out against industrial action being taken, are either of the belief that they live in a utopia, or else are simply living in denial.