

Developing and Maintaining Workers' Solidarity

"Lack of unions and alternate employment opportunities all contribute to the disempowerment of the individual worker and create the corresponding social climate where it is acceptable to consider workers as less than citizens and their lives expendable. Bangladesh Workers Solidarity Network Newsletter, Vol. 1, No. 2 (November 23, 2013)

It can be deduced from this point of view that trade unions are required to play a pivotal role in the of promotion of workers' solidarity. There is seemingly no good reason why trade unions should be scoffed or frowned upon, dismissed as useless and meaningless, or reduce to cinderella status.

Those who share any of these perspectives may be deemed as being ignorant of the role of trade unions, narrow minded, and/ or mischievous. It may be that there are also groups of individuals who because of their narrow interests, be it political or otherwise, would want to denounce the relevance of trade unions. The perceived threat of the trade unions through unification, may be advanced as the single reason for the apparent fear of the labour movement .

It has long be established that the role of trade unions is to represent, protect, inform and provide services for employees at the workplace, local and national level. The functions of trade unions are but an extension of its role, for trade unions represent workers, negotiate on the behalf of workers whilst engaging the collective bargaining process, lobby for change in government policies and laws that will benefit workers, agitate for a high standard of living for workers, press demands for workers' participation in the decision making process, and promote good employer - employee relations.

In times of crisis, it is to be expected that the strength, fortitude and character of trade unions will be tested. The frontal level of attack is usually levied at the leadership of trade unions. This comes from both within and outside the walls of the organization. Members of trade unions must be conscious of the fact that in times of crisis, this usual line of attack is intended to erode confidence in the leadership, to destabilize the organization so as to derail it from the path which it is pursuing.

In an effort to build and maintain trade union solidarity, is important to remind members of trade unions that they have a responsibility to guide and support the leadership of the union. On the other hand, unions and unionized workers need to reach out to non-unionized workers and seek legislative improvements for all.

Trade union solidarity has been mainly responsible for the achievements that labour has gained over the years. In an imperfect world, it is likely that there will be shortcomings and disappointments, but there is the consolation that through collective wisdom and efforts, some effective remedies can be found.

Kofi Annan made the observation that "When economic conditions are difficult, people tend to be less generous and protect themselves; the question of solidarity doesn't mean much to them at that time." In a climate of recession or where pressures are being imposed on trade unions, workers are urged never to lose sight of the importance of workers' solidarity, for it certainly makes the difference to the safeguarding of the rights and freedoms they enjoy.

The rally call for trade unions has long be associated with the singing of the song 'Solidarity Forever'. The holding of hands in a unbroken circle during the singing of the song, is a symbolic gesture of the bond of the unity that is expected to exists and prevail. The signing of the song may be an emotional experience. However, trade union members are challenged to pay careful attention to the lyrics of the song and the message that is being conveyed. It is important to understand that the power of the collective is driven be a common self of purpose and the will to achieve. The of the song "**Solidarity Forever**", written by Ralph Chaplin in 1915, is perhaps the most famous union anthem. It is a song which was specifically written for industrial workers of the world.

*When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,
But the union makes us strong.*

CHORUS:

Solidarity forever,

Solidarity forever,

Solidarity forever,

For the union makes us strong.

Is there aught we hold in common with the greedy parasite,

Who would lash us into serfdom and would crush us with his might?

Is there anything left to us but to organize and fight?

For the union makes us strong.

Chorus

It is we who plowed the prairies; built the cities where they trade;

Dug the mines and built the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid;

Now we stand outcast and starving midst the wonders we have made;

But the union makes us strong.

Chorus

All the world that's owned by idle drones is ours and ours alone.

We have laid the wide foundations; built it skyward stone by stone.

It is ours, not to slave in, but to master and to own.

While the union makes us strong.

Chorus

They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn,

But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn.

We can break their haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn

That the union makes us strong.

Chorus

In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold,

Greater than the might of armies, magnified a thousand-fold.

We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old

For the union makes us strong.