

Organizing Workers

Barbados with its population of approximately 290,000 persons is credited as a progressive small island developing state. According to the employment information released by the Economic Affairs Division in Barbados dated 22 October, 2014, the island has a workforce of 125,400 persons, of which 64,000 are males and 61,000 are females. In the absence of an audit of the membership of trade unions and staff associations on the island, it is estimated that less than 25 per cent of workers are unionized. Given the economic climate and labour market reforms that are driven by restructuring in an effort to improve on cost efficiencies, the employment climate has become one of despair. Layoffs and retrenchment programmes have had a devastating impact on job retention. The slowdown in employment has meant that fewer new jobs have been coming on stream.

In the current climate, it would seem that the organizing of workers presents as a major problem facing the trade union movement. In the private sector, the collapse in agriculture and manufacturing has resulted in tremendous job loss. The sugar industry which once boasted of thousands of workers is now a mere shadow of itself, employing mere hundreds of workers. With the exit of many from employment within the formal economy, this has given way to the emergence of self-employed persons and the growing number of entrepreneurs. These have become members of the informal sector. It would appear that there is not an inclination on the part of members of the informal sector to join a trade union. The problem with the private sector is further exasperated by the growing levels of business closures and mergers, all of which lead to downsizing of the workforce.

As government moves to reduce the cost of doing business and to make it more efficient, the public sector is also a victim of circumstance. The policy of no new hiring except in priority areas, and the retrenchment programme directed in the main at those employed by statutory agencies of government, means that public sector unions and staff associations in much the same way as their private sector counterparts, will be hard pressed to maintain their levels of membership. This contraction in an already limited unionized market is cause for serious concern.

It is evident that this is impacting on the local trade union movement in more ways than one. Most importantly however, is the fact that trade unions and staff associations are obviously hard pressed to maintain their financial stability. These are indeed difficult

times for the labour movement, for which it is challenged to find solutions. The key to the existence of trade unions has always been that of organizing. It therefore requires a return to the fundamentals. May be the time is right for the trade union movement to undertake a comprehensive review of its role and function. As good business practice dictates, an analysis of the business and business model are important in hiring the directorship to chart the way forward. In as much that trade unions are business entities, the same should apply.

In addressing the issue of union membership, it is time for the actors in the labour movement to ask themselves some vexing questions, starting with that of...Why is the number of unionized employees as low as it is, and what is being done to change that? Over and above this, the movement needs to consider what it is doing to make itself attractive to non-unionized workers. Maybe the answer lies in the paying of more attention to the marketing of the services and opportunities that are on offer to the membership.