

Work Stoppages

Work stoppages have become a norm in everyday work life. Neither the industrialized societies nor small island developing states are spared from the actions of employees. Some employers and members of the public view them as disruptive. In truth and in fact they can be, and arguably that is what they are intended to do. Work stoppages for more reasons than one can be rightly label as a necessary evil.

What are work stoppages and what factors contribute to them? The work stoppage is described as a temporary form of protest action taken by employees against the employer. It is usually about matters of pay, managerial policies and poor working conditions. The latter includes concerns about safety and health issues at the workplace. While these three may be categorized as the fundamental issues, the net broadens to include trade union and political issues.

On the subject of trade union issues, one glaring example of this is for the employer to blatantly refuse a trade union as the bargaining agent of the employees. This becomes a major source of contention for employees, who are denied their constitutional right of freedom of association. A work stoppage on this matter enables the workers to call attention to their grievances and highlights the disregard of the employer for their constitution rights, and failure to observe the International Labour Organization Convention No. # 87, on the Right of Workers to Associate.

As far as trade unions are concerned, employers can be rightly accused on contributing both directly and indirectly to work stoppages. This can be substantiated by the fact that some employers are known not to be keen to enter into a collective bargaining agreement which is meant to set out the understandings of the work relationship with employees. This refers to the terms and conditions of work that includes termination, promotion and disciplinary policies and procedures, It is important that there are clear guidelines of workplace policies, procedures and processes.

Where trade unions are not recognized by an employer, this means that there will be the absence of a collective agreement. This brings to the fore the employers' disregard for the ILO Convention #98 on Freedom of Association and the Right to Bargaining Collectively. It is amazing that at the start of 2016, the issue of workers right to be unionized is still being denied. It is hard to believe that after much talk about the repression suffered under slavery and of the move forward as a progressive world, narrow minded thinking that is directed at denying persons their rights, is still very evident.

Right thinking employers ought to know that the educated people of the 21st century will not tolerate this repressive behavior, since for most, at the core basically lies

exploitation. The absence of collective bargaining is a trend and fundamental issue for workers and trade unions that can be solved. It requires that countries update their labour legislation with the passage and proclamation of a Trade Union Recognition Act. If the workers' interest is to be protected then this is where there must be the will on the part of the politicians to take the bull by the horn and address an obvious shortcoming. This gives meaning to progressive thinking that results with progressive legislation being implemented and enforced.

When it comes to work stoppages invariably in some way the breakdown in communication lends to the action. To engage seems as the perfect medicine to head off disputes. Dialogue is intended to inform and to seek solutions. The absence of social dialogue will always be a source of contention where management does not have an appreciation for such. There is a place for inclusiveness in decision making, and where the union as the representative body of the workers is involved, it provides the opportunity for the input of the workers. The opportunity to sit and discuss negates the need for a work stoppage.

It is established that work stoppages are temporary actions taken by workers to press demands or to protest a policy decision taken by management. At the end of the day this results in a significant loss of man hour and productivity. This is well documented for as according to the United States of American Bureau of Labour Statistics in 2014, there were 200,000 days idle from major work stoppages. In the same reported period, approximately 34,000 persons were idle as a consequence of major work stoppages.

This picture if replicated across the world, will undoubtedly be painful to watch. The way forward is to address the shortcomings of workers expectations, and provide a workplace culture and environment that is conducive to good employer – employee relations and good workplace practices.