

Grading the Performance of Labour Unions

Like any other organization, trade unions set out to achieve some specific objectives, goals and even targets. These are determined by the leadership of the organization, by the collective will or mandate of the membership. By and large trade unions will share a common agenda as it relates to organizing, representation, collective bargaining and negotiation. Within standing this, it is reasonable to expect that each trade union will have its individual agenda. Having identified its agenda, the demand is placed on the leadership to deliver.

There is the popular view that trade unions are primarily concern with the compensation and employment of workers. This means that engaging in a successful bargaining exercise that brings increase or improved wages and salaries, benefits and conditions of service would be identified as a key importance indicator. Influencing the establishing of new employment opportunities and job retention would also be a means of measuring the performance of the workers. Where the trade union is known to successfully work with the state and capital in furtherance of employment creation and sustaining levels of employment, this comes a feather in the cap of labour. On the other side of the coin, where labour is unable to successfully negotiate for wages and salaries increases, or is forced to sign off on a less than attractive settlement, this can placed the performance of the leadership under the microscope.

In like manner, the contraction within the economy, potentially leads to the layoffs and retrenchment of workers. The prevailing circumstances places pressure on labour to reduce the level of its wages and salaries demands, and that for improved conditions of services that might incur additional expenditure to the employer. Trade unions are placed between a rock and a hard place as they juggle with their mandate of protecting the interest and welfare of the membership, and being responsibility in giving consideration to what needs to be done in the best interest of the country. This is where the trade union leadership shows its metal or worth. This is where there is need for rational action and maturity to be shown. Leaders who are overwhelm by the demands placed upon them have to be reminded that where the circumstance warrant the exercise of prudence, that it would be callous and insensitive to make unreasonable and unrealistic demands.

Trade union leaders like politicians can be placed in an envious position. Since their survival in office is subjected to the approval of the membership or electorate, they are can rest assure that 'dam if you do and dam if you don't 'will not elude them. It has been well established that the accountability for what is achieved by an organization rest with the leadership. There is no avoidance from this. Contrary to the popular belief that the buck stops with the leader, this can be challenged given that in the leadership of an organization, there is the assumption of collective responsibility. Within the framework of a democracy institution, it is unfortunate that some would attempt to lay the blame squarely at the feet of the leader,

and divorce themselves of any responsibility. Those who pass the buck are in sense admitting their own shortcomings, and /or accepted the dictatorial or authoritarian leadership which prevailed.

As it stands the performance of the trade unions is inextricably linked to the leadership. There is no divorcing one from the other. The fact that the leadership is charged with the responsibility of planning, directing and controlling is enough to substantiate this. Based on the premise that the leadership is responsible for developing the strategies and the implementation of initiatives, the conclusion can be reached that both effectiveness and efficiency would become be key performance indicators to be used in the evaluation of the performance of trade unions. Successful lobbying, and negotiations, representation, organization, planning and management are fundamental to the achieving a good report card for the stewardship of a trade union.

Simply resorting to talking so as secure the placing of the union's position in the historical record, will only satisfy part of the union's agenda. The agenda is best promoted and pursued through a programme of well calculated actions which are results oriented. It should be conceded that it is not enough to just record success, but more importantly, to ensure that there is some level of significance attached to the achievements made. If there is no satisfaction to be had from the achievement recorded, then there is the need for the leadership to return to the drawing board and to start the planning process all over again.