

Shifts in the Industrial Relations Practice

All across the globe, trade unions are facing a myriad of challenges which require that they work with stakeholders to find immediate solutions. There might be however, great speculation as to what is the major problem which confronts them. For some the issues of leadership may be advanced, while others may be of the view that political association or ties could be a factor. While these may have some bearing, the contention is that the genius the of the problems facing trade unions is rooted more in the paradigm shift which has captured world attention ever since the turn of the 21st century.

The shift in the global landscape has given rise to the phenomenon of globalization, neocolonialism and privatization. Herein lies part of the problem as these have placed increasing demands on trade unions to find new approaches to be adopted in the practice of industrial relations. The global recession and the accompanied issues such as unemployment, the rising tide of poverty and the downturn in government's ability to provide basic social services, together constitute some of the pressures facing trade unions, governments and the private sector employers. The management of these requires that good leadership and management practices are followed. The circumstances therefore necessitate that governments, trade unions and the private sector, look to engage in meaningful consultation, dialogue and collaboration. Whilst this is to be promoted and encouraged, the problem that stares us in face the world over, is the willingness on the part of some of the partners to cooperate in working together towards arriving at meaningful solutions.

Trust issues which has a source divide in the relationship between the three partners in the 20th century, may yet be a lingering problem in today's world. The placing of confidence in each other and in the systems which have been established, is what is required if the idea of working together in the national interest is to have meaning and purpose. Beyond the governance issues, most trade unions are confronted with the challenge of dealing with organizing and collective bargaining. This comes as a direct consequence of outsourcing and the contracting of labour. The use of these strategies by employers have the impact on weakening the base of the labour movement, and in so doing negate the effect of forms of industrial action that may be instituted.

The push towards entrepreneurship is also an imposing threat to trade union organizing. There is a strong possibility that with entrepreneurs being a part of the

informal sector, presents a challenge to traditional trade union organizing. It certainly becomes a source of worry where collective bargaining is concerned.

As a means of generating jobs to address the unemployment problem, the strategy of embracing foreign direct investment is promoted as the way forward. In attracting many large international companies to establish themselves with local jurisdictions, this means that some compromises have to be made. The problem for trade unions is that of having to preserve and protect the rights gained by labour and to ensure that labour standards are not compromised. This is where it gets challenging, for governments on the one hand are prepared to make concessions to attract foreign investors, while the trade unions continue to press demands for improved labour legislation.

There is a body of opinion that some of the multi-national corporations tend to indulge in anti-trade union practices. One glaring example of this is the tendency not to recognize trade unions. This spells disaster for the organizing of workers as it puts a damper on the establishment of a bargaining unit, which in turn compromises attempts at instituting the collective bargaining process. This runs afoul of the right of the individual to freedom of association, as is usually enshrined in the national constitution, or where upon a country is a signatory to ILO Conventions #87 and #98. As a consequence of the denial of this fundamental right, trade unions are therefore left to press the government of the day to put a Trade Union Recognition Act into law.

The growing influence of the private sector has made a fundamental difference to the traditional industrial relations practice. The private sector has always been credited as the engine of growth in any economy. As consequence of this, it is has traditionally viewed that this allows the private sector to dictate the forward path. By and large, it would seem that the reliance and actions of the private sector tend to place governments in the invidious position of having to adopt a sensitive and cautious approach, as far as instituting policies are concerned.