

Demands on Trade Union Leaders

The demands by the members of trade unions often lead to trade union leaders being pressed into action, in an effort to meet the expectations of the membership. The nature of the situation sometimes results in immense pressure being imposed upon the leadership to make a decision on a course of action, or to follow the instructions given by the membership. It is at this point that the trade union leaders come under the microscope, as they have to absorb both internal and external pressures.

The leadership is sometimes challenged to cope with the divide within the membership on a matter and a defined course of action to be instituted. The fall out that is likely to follow, manifest itself in the level of forthcoming support by the wider membership. This can play a huge part in determining the achievement of success or resulting failure in the pursuit of a particular cause. In this instance it is the quality of leadership which is brought to bear that can make a difference. This disconnect can be successfully tackled where the Executive Committee or Council, displays a united front in its representation of an issue, and where shop stewards play the role that is expected of them in mobilizing the membership.

It should not be lost upon trade union leaders that they are the voice and ears of working class people, and moreover, are accountable for their action. It is therefore important for trade union leaders to recognize that their role demands that they are essentially good communicators, so as to be able to bring influence to bear upon the membership. Leaders should be proactive and not reactive, accommodating and not insensitive to ideas, and to be strategic in both planning and execution. It requires that leaders understand the need to put aside self-interest, and remove inflated egos. Against the backdrop of the seeming disenchantment with the trade union leaders, it is important that they do not ignore this but to carefully review and reorder their styles and approaches, where necessary, in order to reduce emerging threats.

There is the school thought that charismatic leaders are effective when it comes to the leadership of people. Where this may be so, it follows that such leaders must be able to maintain the confidence and respect of those whom he/she

leads. Trade unions leaders must realize that their leadership should not be built on the premise of a popularity contest. The membership expects leaders to deal with emerging issues, to be forward thinking so as to influence changes that redound to promoting, advancing and safeguarding their interest. It is unwise for trade union leaders to follow the footsteps of politicians and to make the promise of setting out an agenda of achievements in one hundred days of assuming office.

The idea of making such short term promises seems not to take into consideration that the trade union leadership has to engage with the employer or agent of the employer in effecting changes, or to engage with state authorities in lobbying for change to be effected. Since change often takes time, the trade union leaders must be mindful of the need for consultation and dialogue, which can involve other interests within the society, namely the non-governmental and civil society organizations.

Apart from the in-house challenges where the support of the membership could sometimes be a factor, the leadership of trade unions must also face the challenge that comes from the public. The once unquestionable support for actions of labour can sometimes meet with some resentment by some quarters of the public. The irony is that there is a developing tendency on the part of the public to weigh in on the matter without a full knowledge of the issues. The anti-union sentiment has become a feature. In most cases, it appears that the negativity that is communicated, arises out of emotions, partisan interest, or is simply driven by some unknown agenda which people may have.

This bandwagon approach is usually steeped in ignorance of the issue, and can be fueled where upon the matter at hand directly or indirectly impacts on the public. Take for example the decision by the transport sector to take a form of industrial action to press their demands on an issue. The fact that the travelling public is inconvenienced becomes more a matter of concern, than the issue facing the workers. The tongue lashing teachers get when they take a form of industrial actions. It is amazing that they are deemed as unprofessional, uncaring and the list goes on.

In the final analysis, it would appear that there is a demand for the leadership of trade unions to connect with their public. The sharing of information and the

outreach programmes that target the membership and the public are important if the buy-in of the membership and the public is to be achieved and their confidence and respect earned.