

The Demise of the Labour Movement

Throughout the course of the year 2020, they were those who have sought to promote and even prophesying that the demise of the labour movement was imminent. Those who have been so minded, seem to be unaware of the fluctuations which have characterized the life of the labour movement. A point of reference takes us back to 1929-1939, the years of the Great Depression. History reminds us that during this period of the worse ever economic recession to hit the global space, there was massive unemployment and a significant fall off in trade union membership. This is supported by evidence drawn from the United States labour movement, which revealed that in 1920's, labor organizations had over 5,000,000 members, but there was a substantial decline over the next three years with membership falling to 3,500,000.

There are glaring similarities of what was the situation which existed during the global oil crisis of the 1970's. This presented as a major problem for world economies all of which buckles under the pressure that the world oil production per capita began a long-term decline after 1979. The consequence of this was that stagnant economic growth was recorded in many countries as oil prices surged. With resulting inflation and economic contraction, massive unemployment was a common feature of the day. The immediate solution to this was the creation of employment. This is not dissimilar to the state of play which exists today and in the 2008-2009 when there was another global economic recession.

In every instance of the turmoil, trade unions have faced the mounting challenge of maintaining their membership base. For those prophets who take pride in preaching the gloom and doom of the labour movement, they should be aware that the movement has continued to survive the perils from 1929 until now. It is to be understood that conflict of interest between employer and employee has given the union much of its reason for existence. It would be mere wishful thinking that trade unions would just disappear. There is the strong belief that even if there were no unions, workers themselves would undertake to reinvent them, as they recognize the need for a strong institutional voice to represent them. It is to be expected that workers whether individually or collectively are not ignorant of the fact that they stand to be exploited if left to the mercy of the employer. Matthew Taylor, CEO of the Royal Society for the

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Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) and author of the Taylor Review, holds the view that the threat to trade union survival is real. He based his position on the fact that there is “the decline of collectivism, the rise of individualism and so a shift in public attitudes, expectations and norms”.

As has been established, union membership will tend to fluctuate in times of economic crisis and where there is an impact brought about by the labour market forces that include demographic changes and worker migration patterns. At this time when workers are being thrust into working from home, there is likely to see a fall off in trade union membership. As time elapses, it is expected that workers will become extremely conscious of the need to have representation to protect the erosion of gains which labour had earned overtime. As it stands the change in the employment relations where workers are being placed on individual contracts is a threat to the collectivism of the industrial relations practice as we have come to know it. The trade union response to this treat is to modify their approach in the organizing of workers. There is room for the organizing of workers by sectors and for the development of programmes to attract unorganized workers and maintain those who already hold membership. There is room for the trade union movement to move in organizing the third sector; those who consider themselves as self-employed.

It is widely accepted that trade union membership has catapulted since the recorded peak in the late 1970s. William Jordan when speaking in the House of Lords in the Britain in 2019 on the future of trade unions, made the observation that, “whirlwind of disruption has taken its toll on worker representation in most countries, and nowhere more so than here in Britain, the birthplace of trade unionism”. It follows that if unions are to continue to play an important role in the workplace, change is necessary and inevitable. With an ongoing change to the demographic of the workforce, trade unions must direct their attention to attracting young workers. Though facing troubling time trade unions are warned against being intimidated by the prevailing circumstances. It is expected that workers in a new labour market environment where workplace technology is dominant, will bring to the force new issues that impinge on workers’ rights. This apart, trade unions can take comfort in the fact that they will always be those who fall in the category of vulnerable workers and those performing precarious work, who will always required being organized

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and represented. This holds true of blue-collar workers, especially those in the public service, who often require the exercise of the collective will in the championing of their causes.

The hard fact is that the actions and attitude of employers and government to trade unions can be a cause for concern. However, with support from government by putting in place labour legislation to guide the industrial relations relationship and practices, this will make a difference to the way trade unions effectiveness is perceived. Trade unions have to denounced the myth that younger workers are not interested in unionization. It is for trade unions to embark on programmes of strategic marketing, outreach and public relations, all of which are calculated to make a fundamental difference in creating interest and attracting membership.

It can thus be concluded that the death of the trade union movement is only a though, but not an option.