

The Social Partnership Construct

A Trade Union National Centre is described as a federation or confederation of trade unions in a country. It is said that nearly every country in the world has a national trade union centre, and in some instances some have more than one. Based on this internationally accepted definition, it becomes clear that an individual trade union does not qualify to be accorded the status of a national centre.

The National Trade Union Centre functions as the global voice of working class people. It therefore means that every national trade union centre is expected to play the role that is similarly undertaken by the International Trade Union Congress (ITUC). The primary mission of this international body which is based in Brussels, is the promotion and defence of workers' rights and interests through international cooperation between trade unions, global unions, global campaigning and advocacy within the major global institutions. The local national trade union congress or confederation is expected to initiate its campaigning, advocacy or lobbying at the parochial level. As in the case of trade union national centres across the Caribbean region, it is expected that they engaged in bilateral and tripartite consultation; with government as a stakeholder and with the private sector community.

The embrace of the national trade union centre in tripartite governance arrangement that involves the government, employers and workers representatives is modelled from that established arrangement of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The tripartite structure practiced within the ILO, is unique, in that it provides for a forum in which government and the social partners in labour and the private sector, can freely and openly debate on matters of labour policies and standards. With the establishment of this tripartite governance arrangement, there is every expectation that the partners would commit to engaging in the process of meaningful dialogue and consultation. There is no place for lip service to be paid to the process, neither should the engagement of dialogue and consultation treated as a matter of convenience.

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Tripartite consultation at the national level is not to be taken lightly. Governments should not overlook the fact that labour and the private sector as social partners, have an important part to play in the governance and decision making; as they help to shape social and economic policies.

Under constitution of the ILO, governments are accorded membership status of the body on the decision of the General Assembly, on the formal acceptance of the obligations of the Constitution of the organization. The current 187 members states of the ILO are under the obligation to recognize both workers' and employers' representatives. In embracing workers' representation in the tripartite consultation and the governance process, governments do so recognizing that trade unions are democratic, self-organizing institutions of working class people whose role is to advance the rights of workers and citizens. Employers' representation in the tripartite consultation and governance process, is grounded in the fact that contributions of employers' organizations is deemed to be critical. This is based on how these can ensure that the national social and economic objectives are properly and effectively formulated and win the support of the business community.

It is envisaged that for the effective working of a social partnership to take place, it is best that there is representation from the three groups of government, workers and employers. The identification of each of these groups as single entity and their presentations as a consolidated group, makes for a constructive and effective arrangement under the social partnership. This would certainly would eliminate the glaring possibility of division within the various groups when it comes to decision making. To encourage the participation of individual interests within the tripartite model is a dangerous practice, as this goes against the promotion of the construct of a tripartite arrangement. This can contribute to the loss of objectivity and contribute to acts of undermining within the various groups.

It is to be endorsed that if a good social partnership is to be achieved, there must the powerful and independent organization of both workers and employers at the table, who can represent the interest of their respective sector without fear of division and contradiction. While it is understandable that Governments may want

to practice inclusivity, it is questionable if to encourage and promote such would be to create divisions at the level of national bodies.

While it is prudent to respect the autonomy of each individual trade union or business entity that exercises its choice not to be part of the established and recognized national body in the sector, it ought to be considered that the value and significance of the social partnership stands for something. Based on this, there ought not to be any tinkering with the construct of the partnership, so that it places any of the partners in a position to question its intent and purpose.