

## The Independence of Trade Unions

Trade unions are known to be member based organizations. They are autonomous bodies which function in accordance with the provisions of their own constitution and established rules. Trade unions are described as a group of employees who join together to maintain and improve their conditions of employment. Generally, trade unions interface with the employer at the workplace for the purpose of representing the interest of workers. Whereas, there is a working relationship which exists between trade unions and employers, trade unions are nonetheless independent of employers.

It is in the interest of trade unions to maintain their independence from the employer, given that they have a responsibility to represent the interest of their members through the process of negotiations and collective bargaining for improvements in conditions of service and pay. It would certainly be counterproductive, should trade unions opt to compromise their independence by having anything other than a working relationship with the employer. Those who for whatever reasons question the independence of trade unions, ought to be aware of the wider remit of trade unions, which includes working to improve the quality of public services and industrial action.

Trade unions also have a role to play in political campaigning, as they might wish to influence the outcome of national elections, through the election of a government that is not anti-union and anti-worker. Trade unions are not meant to be political organizations, but they cannot remove themselves from having a political interest as far as influencing national policy development and framework legislation, which includes labour legislation. The independence of trade unions is paramount, since they are expected to interface with the employer, government and government agencies through the process of consultation, dialogue, negotiations and bargaining.

The observation has been made that a 'trade union which is not under the control of an employer or group of employers or of one or more employers' associations, and is free from interference by an employer or any such group or association.' It can be concluded that the behaviour and actions of an individual trade union, might account for a growing distrust of trade unions and the calling into question of their independence.

The point must be stressed that trade unions are not meant to be a political organizations, but instead to be apolitical. This means that trade unions are not attached to a political party, have no interest and involvement in politics. It is however difficult to remove trade unions from having an interest in political issues, as the leadership views these matters and the outcomes, to be of interest to the welfare of workers and the citizens of the state. It is no secret that trade unions lobby the government of the day on policies which promote the labour objectives.

It is because of the lobbying and agitation made by trade unions that government has addressed through legislation or policy, such issues as equality legislation, abolition of child labour, occupation safety and health legislation, holiday with pay, maternity leave and other social protection measures and benefits.

Towards maintaining their independence, it is expect that trade unions would be free of external influences. They must be free to fight against unfair, unjust and discriminatory practices, to protect and preserved the rights and freedoms as provided by the Constitution and the law of the land.

The Independence of Trade Union: Dennis de Peiza, Labour & Employee Relations Consultant, Regional Management Services Inc., 8 March 2024

