

FORUM

SO, YOU THINK BEING A TRADE UNION IS PLAIN SAILING?

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ABSTRACT

The survival of trade unions depends to a large extent on their ability to adapt to change in the economy on a macro level, and on their efficiency and effectiveness on the micro level. Their ability to survive resides in the loyalty and support of the rank and file and the extent to which the union fulfils its purpose in and outside the workplace. South African trade union members are, however, not always exposed to and perhaps not interested in the survival problems their trade union is experiencing. Job security and an income high enough to meet the basic needs of their families are their main concerns.

Low economic growth, tough competition and the difficulties globalisation has brought to South Africa are some of the challenges facing trade unions. The success and survival of organisations in the private and public sector are also key factors in their own success and survival. Whether this “economic law” (the success of the trade union depends on the success of the employer) is understood by the typical trade union member is debatable. If indeed it is understood, a more cooperative approach towards management could be expected. However, adversarialism and sometimes arrogance in the workplace suggest that the extent to which this “economic law” is understood is questionable. Either the leadership of trade unions is misleading its supporters or trade union members are ill-informed about the consequences of low economic growth for the trade union’s ability to meet their expectations.

Trade unions in South Africa are insensitive to changes at the macro level (the economy as a whole) and the micro level (activities on the shop floor). One of the consequences of this is that their future existence and their members’ job security are threatened. A further repercussion is that the trade unions are not seen as responsible role-players in the economy, thereby creating mistrust among job creators.

The aim of this article is to highlight the problems currently facing trade unions, and to explore possible avenues for ensuring their survival.

1 INTRODUCTION

Unusual demands are placed on the modern worker as a result of the pressures that market conditions generate. Production processes of three decades or more ago were mainly people-dominated in a labour-intensive production context (Buell 1997:41; Fitzgerald 1999:46). This aspect, the production processes in an industrial environment, is probably less applicable in a Third World country which is better known for primary economic activities. The role of people

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in the production line has given way to the computer and its accompanying mechanisation and automation (Buell 1997:42). The globalisation of world markets is another factor influencing the worker and work process of today. Globalisation has dramatically reduced the size of the economic playing field, and so altered the game. The accent now placed on speed and quality has virtually eliminated the demand for the traditional worker.

In the modern business world, use is made of a core group of workers comprising those who possess specific skills in particular areas (Buell 1997:41). The rest of the workforce consists of independent contractors, whose services are used on a temporary or freelance basis. The idea is to achieve greater output and better quality at lower cost through competitiveness. The permanent management-worker relationship is disappearing. The modern worker is also his own employer, because his competence creates a demand for his services. Services and other activities are outsourced chiefly to the most competent and brightest workers, with the result that others are experiencing even more acutely the current growth in unemployment. This has further negative consequences on the socio-economic milieu, consequences that include unstable family and community life, and poverty (Somavia 2000). The need for employment is therefore becoming one of the greatest issues facing modern man. The income generated by work in turn addresses other needs related to family life, safety, health, education and retirement.

The modern employer's survival has had a further influence on the job security of workers. The employer of the last decade emphasised the use of more flexible working patterns and pressure was placed on legislators to make labour laws less prescriptive (Pollert 1988 and 1991; Atkinson 1985; Millward et al 1992; Hunter et al 1993; Penn 1993). Benefits that flow from this include: non-payment for absence, less money spent on labour where the employer is experiencing a decrease in the demand for his product, and greater preparedness to work hours which would normally be seen as rest periods. The employer has also adjusted his management style to achieve survival: team work is given priority, responsibilities are delegated to workers, and the role of the supervisor has changed from that of policeman to that of facilitator. The dividing line between management and the workers has also become much less defined, and the workers have taken over much of what was traditionally a management responsibility. Thus, management at the lower and middle levels have seen their traditional privileges slowly disappear. Frawley (1996:18) notes that these levels are increasingly having to contend with, for example, working overtime, taking leave when it suits the organisation, and salary increases similar to those given to the general worker.

The issues discussed above have also taken their toll on the health of trade unions, and in First World countries unions have not been able to maintain their position in the last two decades. A similar phenomenon was experienced in 1930, whereas in the 1890s and 1970s trade unions showed a growth in numbers. It would appear that the trade union movement sees the prevailing situation in a very serious light, given the frantic attempts being made to reverse current trends.

2 THE NECESSITY FOR TRADE UNIONS

The most important function of trade unions is to level the playing fields for management and the workforce (Frawley 1996:18). Actually, the capitalist system gives the employer more rights and powers than it does the employee. It is accepted that as investor and risk bearer the employer has the prerogative to make the decisions. This can be taken too far, especially when the employee could be exploited as a result of decisions made by the employer. The trade union has the potential to mobilise labour in a collective unit to decrease the extent of the decision-making autonomy of the employer.

The trade union can play this role in different ways. The crucial issue is collective bargaining. This means the inclusion of checks and balances in the decision-making process, the creation of a culture of legitimacy and fairness, the acceptance of co-dependence on and respect for each other, the development of respect for basic fundamental principles and rights of people in the workplace, the development of the understanding that healthy labour relations are good for the enterprise performance as well as the broader economy and the consequent social stability, the protection and improvement of workers' interests, and through this the combating of poverty and the application of different theories to achieve the trade unions' goals (Buel 1997:41; Somavia 2000; Ackers et al 1996:1; Webb & Webb 1921:1).

It is clear that trade unions are not in a position to fill these roles themselves. Trade unions do in fact possess the potential, but certain prerequisites must be complied with to perform the roles successfully (Marley 1998:39). For trade unions to be relevant in this sense, they must have power. Power is primarily founded in membership numbers, but also in members' potential, and the influence that they are able to exercise over the employer. Further, unions possess the potential, through collective action, to force employers to take different decisions, and therefore to broaden democracy, in order to influence political elections and parties, and to use their financial strength to buy decision-making power (for example, to take over the ownership of businesses) (Marley, 1998:39).

The perception that management has had of trade unions throughout history has not remained constant. The role of trade unions will therefore vary, depending on the degree of acceptance or recognition that they receive from management. At the end of the 19th century employers did not see workers as individuals with different needs, but as production factors like machinery with a task to perform. In 1890, CJ Harrah (President of the Midvale Steel Co), summed it up in this way: "We have absolutely no regard for machinery or for men" (Frawley 1996:18). This perception contributed to the fact that trade union membership, as a result of greater solidarity, increased among workers in the USA between 1897 and 1904 from 427 000 to just over 2 million. In the early eighties, business schools in the USA sold the idea that return on capital was the overriding criterion for success or failure (Buell 1997:41). Shareholders, as a result, were focused on quick returns. The potential and role of human beings as workers and production factors were ignored. Long-term investment in human capital was not made. This resulted in a widening of the gap between the interests of the employer and those of the workers. Companies that ensured that the chasm did not get too wide, and attempted to keep a balance between the two poles, now have a workforce that is inclined to greater commitment to the organisation.

In the nineties, the cold facts that often led to retrenchments made way for a more humanistic approach. This invited open sympathy, and at times public figures even made pro trade union remarks. The need for trade unions was acknowledged; they were seen as an institution that could bring balance in a world where the difference between the rich and the poor could create exploitation (Frawley 1996:18).

3 THE DETERIORATION OF TRADE UNIONS

The decline in trade unions' popularity is clearly apparent if the membership numbers of trade unions in First World countries are considered. In the USA, the membership of trade unions is currently very low in comparison with other countries. In the 1950s, a third of all workers in the USA were union members. In the 1990s, this had changed to one-sixth in the public sector and one-tenth in the private sector. Seen as a whole, trade union members in the USA are now a third

of what they were at the highest point just before World War II (Buell 1997:42). In some private sectors, their membership has reached its lowest point ever, namely, one out of seventy (Masters 1995:11). In Britain, recruitment in the production sector, which was the biggest provider of work in the previous ten decades, halved between 1979 and 1994. In addition, ownership of multinational companies doubled in this time. Trade union activities in Japan have become more popular in the last three decades, but in spite of this management is still in control of the decision-making. Ackers et al (1996:22) state that this phenomenon is not the same for all countries and sectors, and trade unions' strength and popularity vary from time to time, from sector to sector, and also from country to country. The operation and influence of market forces (such as supply and demand) are not limited to certain countries, and their influence on trade unions over the past two decades paints a picture of trade union deterioration. Although the influences and reasons are expanding, the following are clearly identifiable:

3.1 External influences

These influences are outside the control of the trade unions and can be seen as environmental changes, namely:

- **New management approach**

Since the early eighties a new management approach has come into being which sees the workforce in a different light. A new management culture and language have developed similar to those reflected by business schools, Human Resources Management (HRM), Total Quality Management (TQM), Employee Involvement (EI), Empowerment, Information Groups, Quality Circles, Profit Sharing (Hobsbawn 1981; Gardner & Palmer 1992; Guest 1987 and Marsh 1992). The worker has been redefined as part of the organisation (Ackers et al 1996:24), is involved in decision making, and has a part to play in ownership (in trade union circles this is known as "joiners"). In addition, says Burtless (1997:19), there has been an increased focus on workers with greater skills, greater work enthusiasm, higher productivity and the ability to engage in innovative thinking. They are rewarded with long-term contracts, incentive bonuses and job security. Meritorious behaviour is highlighted, and those who qualify have had their salaries increased astronomically. This has made the wage gap stretch to as high as 200 to 1 between the highest levels of management and the lowest levels of workers. Wealth distribution has also played its part in terms of power concentration in favour of the employer. Two decades ago the richest 1 per cent of the USA population controlled 28% of the marketable wealth of the world, whereas today, that same group controls 42%.

The rest of the workforce, which make up the majority and do not form part of the wealthy sector, have had their job security threatened. This has also had the consequence of making trade unions less confrontational. In 1970, 30 out of 1 000 work days were lost in the USA owing to disputes. This has decreased to 2 out of 1 000 in 1996. The approach was more collaborative in nature and less conflict driven. Trade unions were not attacked directly, but their relevance became questionable, because their members were seen as part of the "enemy" and at times they were even ignored by management. In order to justify their presence, trade unions had to adopt a more conciliatory approach to management. This was known as the "New Realist Agenda" (Marsh 1992).

- **Information technology**

The production processes that three decades ago were mainly carried out by means of manual labour are these days controlled by computerised machinery (Buell 1997:41). Productivity has generally increased, and in some cases it has even doubled. In certain activities, such as the textile industry in Japan, a few workers control the entire production process. Ackers et al (1996) say they are trained to be totally in control of a highly mechanised process, as in the printing and other industries. These changes have created a demand for a different type of workplace and worker. Certain facets of the production process can be carried out by the worker at his home, while other facets are more suited to contract work and casual work. This makes it difficult for the trade unions to organise themselves. In many cases the worker is responsible for his own career and the opportunity for permanent employment has decreased. Self-employment practices have, for instance, doubled in Britain between 1979 and 1990. The type of worker required today is one who can think on his feet, who is continually looking for better solutions and is able to be flexible, and who accepts the unpredictability of the market and is prepared to experiment and to take responsibility for his decisions. Other noteworthy developments in the last two decades in Britain have been the increase in temporary work, a decrease in the size of organisations, a growth in smaller and less bureaucratic organisations, and a marked increase in cyclical unemployment in the 1980s and the 1990s.

There are also examples, though, where computerisation of production processes has not led to increased productivity. In the 1980s, General Motors spent \$600m in a Detroit plant on robots. This plant has, over time, shown the lowest productivity of all GM plants in the USA. This is an example where technology was wrongly applied (Buell 1997:41).

- **Growth in free trade agreements**

Various agreements were signed between countries and economic blocks in the last two decades in order to make markets freer. This has resulted, for example, in the lifting of import restrictions on imports from some countries. This globalisation effect has created more competition. In countries where many protective regulations have traditionally applied, greater pressure has been experienced and this has resulted in net job losses. This has affected trade unions negatively because their membership has decreased (Buell 1997:42).

- **Privatisation**

The acceptance that the private sector is more productive than the public sector, and can therefore handle a task more cheaply and more quickly, has received great international support. Numerous public activities have ended up in the hands of the private sector. This has been accompanied by retrenchments, which have dealt a further blow to trade union membership (Ferner & Colling 1991; O'Connell Davidson 1993; Fairbrother 1994 and Walsh 1995).

- **Flexible labour laws**

The demands on employers to be more adaptable to market changes have forced governments of countries to make labour laws less rigid and prescriptive (Ackers et al 1996:17). This has made recruitment more flexible and reduced job security. Trade unions have, as a consequence, experienced more variation in their membership numbers, which in turn has made their own situation more unstable.

3.2 Internal influences

These influences refer to the unsatisfactory ways in which trade unions are managed, and the ineffective ways in which their functions are carried out, namely:

- **Working methods**

In spite of the far-reaching changes which have taken place in the business world and which have been instituted by business leaders, trade unions have, in the last two decades, stagnated in their way of doing business, and have required an image of being conservative and bureaucratic organisations. Their own working methods have not kept pace with what has happened in the workplace. In the literature, they are accused of being undemocratic institutions which have changed little over time. Other characteristics which have been highlighted are: out-moded attitudes and practices, heavy conservatism, closed decision making processes, closed-minded, outdated policies, nepotism, and at times blatant corruption (Buell 1997:42; Fitzgerald 1999:46 and Kushner 1996). These accusations should put any organisation behind in its path towards effectiveness and efficiency.

- **Incorrect focus**

Buell (1997:41) says trade unions are characterised by an overemphasis on attention to needling, where the workers' monetary considerations are concerned (wages/salaries). Although this role made trade unions popular in the past, other needs have not been addressed. Market forces have in many cases meant that unions have been powerless in situations where employers have been experiencing financial problems with a resultant decrease in staff. The workers' other needs have not received the same attention as the monetary issues, and here the social side of the worker is referred to, as well as the environment in which he finds himself every day.

- **Inability to organise workers in a trade union**

Greater competition as a result of a freer market environment has meant that larger organisations have distanced themselves from ineffective functions. This has created a need for a greater number of smaller organisations in the market, a need which has been satisfied over time. The smaller organisations have smaller workforces, which has made it more difficult for trade unions to recruit members there. In addition, unions are increasingly finding that young workers question the relevance of trade unions because they see themselves as a liberated generation and one which does not need identification (Kushner 1996).

- **Decline in service delivery**

Trade unions are losing members because they do not see their members as their clients, and do not pay the necessary attention to their needs. The member dictates the pace, and continually wants to feel that he is the most important gear in the trade union machine. The members' needs must be determined, and attended to, in order to create a strong loyalty and cohesiveness which could be marketed further (Kushner 1996).

- **The members' uniformity and equality are questioned**

The trade unions' basic premise that every member is equal, and that merit is not a basis for recognition, has meant that workers with outstanding abilities, and those who are productive, no

longer wish to be union members. Trade unions that have a recruitment agency “Hiring Hall System”) have found that they are left with only the less skilled and less productive members. The rest, who decided to act independently, have found that their contract time is much more fully booked than that of the other trade union members. It is clear that the market is experiencing that there is a difference between the work ethics and productivity of trade union members and non trade union members. Non trade union members are also more familiar with, and are proponents of, practices such as profit sharing, incentive bonuses and merit payments. Some trade unions are not even recruiting more members in some cases because this means that they have to look for work for more members, and this can diminish the chance of finding work for old members (Kushner 1996).

- **Poor management of funds**

In some unions pension and group insurance funds are enjoying diminished confidence. This can be ascribed to policy regulations and investments that do not work in practice or are simply not practicable (Kushner 1996).

- **Incompetent market forecasting**

In many instances there is evidence to suggest that trade unions do not always understand or want to accept the position of their employers in the market. Employers with experience of trade unions often have higher cost structures than employers without trade unions. Too much pressure on the employer can put that employer out of business. If businesses fail, huge job losses are experienced, and this results in a further decline in the trade unions (Kushner 1996).

- **Weak leadership**

Most unions that have experienced a decrease in membership can be accused of having leaders that are not flexible and adaptable in a changing social and economic environment. The leaders are also not known for their future oriented thinking, or for acting innovatively. If, in fact, they were innovative and future-gearred, they would be able to make the unions pro-active organisations and be prepared for any situations and contingencies that might occur (Kushner 1996).

- **Duplication**

The fact that similar trade unions act in the same sectors and sometimes even in the same geographic areas results in a duplication of services and thus also costs. A coming together, or coalition, for greater efficiency or effectiveness, could thus be a generally accepted course of action. This has not taken place, however. Every trade union’s history and unique circumstances effectively serve as a barrier to amalgamation with other trade unions (Kushner 1996).

4 WHAT TRADE UNIONS CAN DO TO SURVIVE

Trade unions are at the crossroads and have to give serious thought to whether they will be relevant in future. This is not the first time that trade unions have been in this position - their dynamics have always meant that a solution has been found (Bacon & Storey in Ackers et al 1996:41).

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, it has become clear that trade unions’ structures and

methods of acting (based on those of the previous century) have outgrown their usefulness. A change in profile and a new **raison d'être** that are aimed at a refocus on environmental changes and proactivity in actions, are required. A new way of thinking has become necessary (Somavia 2000, Wickens 1993:76 and Kenny & Florida 1993:300).

Somavia (2000) says the elements for relevancy are threefold: Firstly, trade unions should be certain about their future. They should thus understand that traditional labour-intensive activities will be less so in the future. Recruitment of trade union members should thus be aimed at establishing demand for labour-intensive activities. Secondly, trade unions should seek recognition for the role that they play, and a culture should thus be created that sees them as a necessity. Thirdly, they should be in a position to bring about change that is visible and significant. Masters (1995:11) goes further, and says that trade unions' approaches should be less unfriendly and should promote greater collaboration. Examples of this have already been seen in the nineties at international companies such as Xerox, Levi Strauss and AT & T (Applebaum & Batt in Wickens 1993:76). Thus, greater responsibility must be shown through greater sensitivity towards the employer and the broader economic environment. The activities of trade unions in Japan and Germany, which adjust quickly to markets and environmental changes, and act as role models for modern trade unions, are an example of this. This can be extended further to the building of partnerships and the breaking down of the "they/we" syndrome (the social distance between management and the workers).

In order to enter the 21st century with confidence, the following are possible strategies that trade unions could follow in order to remain relevant and to secure their future:

- **Compatibility:** Trade unions must be flexible to changes in environment. Collective bargaining should be sensitive to macro and micro economic changes. The workplace of the future and flexible recruitment practices will be a determining factor for powerful membership numbers (Fitzgerald 1999:46; Ackers et al 1996:9 and Kushner 1996).
- **Creativity:** Trade unions should take the lead and be progressive and areas should be developed that were previously not explored (Masters 1995:11 and Ackers et al 1996:17). They should still provide for needs where there is a demand, and these needs should be kept alive. The workers should still see the trade union as a spokesperson, a protector and a promoter of their interests. Possible strategies that could be explored are:
 - Improve the workers' uniqueness and potential (try, for example, to improve educational levels). Although new demands face the worker and more flexible workplace circumstances and recruitment practices will be valid in future, the relationship between the employer and the worker will not change. Therefore a different approach is required, although this should be one that still requires trade unions. There will still be a need for input in the decision-making process and the protection of interests. The following old trade union song is still likely to be heard (Frawley 1996:18):

Don't scab for the bosses,
Don't listen to their lies
Us poor folks haven't got a chance
Unless we organize ...

- Expand network interests and attempt to form mega trade unions. These unions have enormous membership numbers and members come from all over the world.
- Use working methods and practices that have advantages for the trade union, the worker and in particular, the employer (form partnerships).
- Concentrate on efficient and effective management. Good planning, organisation, and above all effective financial management, combined with active membership recruitment and service delivery of a high standard, should lessen problems for trade unions.
- Utilise an effective marketing strategy to satisfy the necessity for trade unions, and by this means also win the sympathy of the workforce and the public.
- Focus on areas such as the informal sector, and small business development, which have the highest potential to generate employment. These sectors are also known for poor working conditions and an absence of trade union involvement.
- Focus on a diversified membership. Concentrate in particular on the recruitment of younger members and women.
- Utilise the electronic media as instruments for marketing, communication and mobilisation.
- Utilise a single mouthpiece for high level and international debate.

If these proactive steps are taken, trade unions should be able to fill the role which they were able to accomplish in the last two decades of the previous century.

The situation in South Africa is not the same as in the international arena in all aspects. Although the macro economic factors have a negative impact on South African trade unions, the trade union movement is still seen as a vehicle or instrument for overcoming political, economic and social obstacles. In terms of membership, trade unions in South Africa have not experienced major changes. Some swapping of members did occur, but the total picture remain stable. It is difficult to forecast future changes, but being alert to environmental changes might help the South African trade unions in their quest for survival.

5 CONCLUSION

In the light of the crucial role trade unions play in the employer-employee relationship, their future should be secured. If the world-wide decrease in their membership is taken into account, the seriousness of the problem will become increasingly evident if no urgent effort is made to find answers to their various problems. To counter the negative external and internal influences, trade unions have to be very proactive, compatible and creative to ensure their continued existence. The important role trade unions have played economically, socially and politically in South Africa, and the role they can play in future, make their survival even more critical.

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