



Trade unions and society

Trade unions, particularly in the public service, are uniquely positioned to advance the interest of society. Yet, most trade unions underestimate their capacity to do so. The general tendency among trade unions is to look at issues through the prism of sectoral interests rather than a broader perspective that sees a convergence of both trade union and societal interests.

Sword of justice and defender of vested interest?

It is not impossible for trade unions to serve more than one purpose. As Flanders aptly reminds us, *“Trade unions have always had two faces, a sword of justice and a defender of vested interests.”*ⁱ The history of trade unionism in South Africa is inseparable from the broader societal struggles for social justice and freedom. From back then, the trade union movement has been as interested in the vested interest of workers as it has been in the struggles of the poor and the oppressed.

Whereas under apartheid trade unions channelled their energies towards the demise of the apartheid system, the reality of democracy calls for trade unions to change their strategy; for them to play a new, constructive role in society. A trade union that fails to align its members’ interests with the aspirations of society is an unwitting agent in mobilising negative public sentiments against itself. This can only be at the expense of the said union.

But this should not be misconstrued to mean that the mere advent of democracy has caused the contradictions between employers and employees to disappear. The end of apartheid did not represent the end of workers struggles. As Alexandra Spirkin counsels us, *“every development produces contradictions, resolves them and at the same time gives birth to new ones.”*ⁱⁱ The dawn of democracy – itself a development that emerged out of the resolution of the contradictions between oppression and the quest for freedom – has given birth to many new challenges in our new society in the making. The challenge is for trade unions to strike a balance between vigilance in defence of worker rights and alignment with the general aspirations of society.



Our bond with the public

There is no better positioned trade union to play such a crucial role than the Public Servants Association. The public sector provides a unique opportunity for trade unions to serve as agents of societal change.

The interest of society – for example, in good public education, quality public health care and a reliable and efficient public transport – coincide with the interest of workers for better working conditions in the public institutions responsible for providing these services to the public. The deterioration of public services does not only affect workers, it also impacts negatively on society as well. There is an objective convergence between societal interests and those of workers.

When public education is in a mess, not only are the conditions of employment for teachers unpropitious, the right to quality education of members of society is also in jeopardy. This is why the PSA must at all times position itself alongside social forces pushing for improvements in public education.

When there is a shortage of gloves and medication in hospitals, it is not only members of society that are in danger; the lives of health workers are also in great peril. Properly functioning and well-resourced hospitals are as good for workers as they are an essential need for patients.

The absence of an efficient public transport system makes both public servants and members of society arrive late at work and to spend more money on transport. Indeed, the rising cost of transport adds to the escalating cost of living – inflation – which affects both workers and members of society alike.

The loss of public confidence in public institutions is also not good for trade unions operating in the public service. When members of society take their kith and kin to private schools, and private hospitals, etc., instead of public institutions, it is a vote of no confidence in the workers who work in those institutions. It is therefore in the interest of trade unions to side with members of the public in calling for a public service that delivers quality service to society.

Public servants – the core constituency of the PSA – are the coalface of delivery of much-needed services to the public. Their actions, both as employees and as members of trade unions, can serve to drive or undermine social change. Trade unions should therefore see the public as a partner rather than a hindrance towards the fulfilment of their members' vested interests.

Distinguishing the PSA from the rest

Successful trade unions are those that forge alliances with society. Such trade unions are guided by the simple, yet profound principle that “unionists are members of society first before they are unionists.” This principle has always underpinned the PSA’s outlook. All PSA members – new or old – have an obligation to internalise it.

Furthermore, it is important to ensure that whatever we criticise the employer for we ourselves are not guilty of the same charge. We must be consistent in our demand for public accountability in government and be equally determined in demanding the same of ourselves. This is how the PSA can claim moral leadership in the trade union movement in South Africa.

An even bigger task is to change public perceptions about trade unions. We must extricate ourselves from the growing and bad image of trade unions as reckless, violent and agents of anarchy. The PSA must be the champion of lawful and peaceful demonstration and protest. We must, for the good of the name of our organisation, be wary of the violent elements that may seek to hijack our demonstrations and delegitimize our cause.

Vandalism of public property must be condemned, at all times. As a responsible trade union, we must take a step to educate our members about the implications of the June 2012 Constitutional Court ruling that upheld the rights of people to claim compensation for damages incurred during strike action. We must do this to inculcate a culture of responsibility and good citizenship among our members. This will also protect the union from potential financial loss as a result of violence or vandalism during strike actions.

The PSA must win the hearts and minds of society, and swing public sympathy towards the interests of the workers. Our members must, wherever they are, demonstrate attributes of good leadership and behave as truly dedicated servants of the people. Our union must be a magnet that attracts people with integrity, unionists who are committed to the general well-being of society.

Conclusion

The role of trade unions as both the sword of justice and defender of vested interest is not to diminish anytime soon. Trade unions such as the PSA occupy a unique space that positions them strategically to serve as agents of societal change. The beginning of this task is the realisation of the convergence between vested union interest and broader societal interests.



The PSA regards the public as a partner rather than a hindrance towards the fulfilment of its members' vested interests. This is what distinguishes us from the rest. It is what positions us strategically as a union of choice in South Africa.

ⁱFlanders, A., 1970, Management and unions, London: Faber.

ⁱⁱSpirkin, A., 1983, Dialectical materialism, Progress publishers.