

A REFLECTION OF EXPERIENCES ENCOUNTERED BY LABOUR UNIONS OPERATING AT THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

In this article, the author seeks to explore what the unions' members experience pertaining the recognition and operation of the public sector labour unions at the higher education institutions. A focus on this paper is made mainly on the recognition of the labour unions which operate in two of the South African higher education institutions. The objective of the study was to determine what experiences and challenges do unions' members (both ordinary and officials of the unions) undergo and observe from their presence in operating at the higher education institutions.

Keywords: Organizational Rights Agreement, Labour Unions, Recognition, Collective Bargaining

1. INTRODUCTION

A proposal by Walton and McKersies (1965), in the "classic behavioural theory on labour negotiations", holds that many issues besides dispensable deals need to be incorporated during bargaining negotiations. Matters such as job security, bargaining, and work organization could be included. They suggest that such issues are normally standardized and classic, rather than being measurable. The interests of the employer and the union could be presented in terms of cooperation, rather than confrontation, to resolve the problems. Collective bargain therefore has a major role to play since according to article (2)154 of the ILO Convention it implies to "all negotiations which take place between an employer, a group of employers or one or more employers' organizations, on the one hand, and one or more workers' organizations, on the other, for:

- Determining working conditions and terms of employment; and/or
- Regulating relations between employers and workers; and/or
- Regulating relations between employers or their organizations and a workers' organization or workers' organizations".

The employer and the union, as parties concerned in dealing with various labour issues, could view engagements such as collective bargaining as fair discussions, rather than debatable negotiations. Section 23(5) of the Constitution of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) also confers the right to engage in collective bargaining.

Historically, workers joined unions for promotion and defence of their own interests as employees. Unions were able both to strengthen the workers' job security and to protect them against

unfair treatment by their employers (Holley *et al.*, 2001; Bret, 1980). To deal with procedures which unions implement bringing about justice, Alexander *et al.* (1995:75) state that "justice considerations are a fundamental component of employees' desires for union representation as well as efforts by management to keep unions out of their workplace". The reality of the matter is that the union society utilizes protective or collective bargaining in the recreation of aspects of labour relations or employment relations in the workplace. This approach, however, does not encapsulate the interest of the local press voluntarily. Unions have promoted the following employment relations benefits, as noted by Nurse and Devonish (2006:91):

- "Providing appropriate procedures where employees have grievances
- Ensuring greater job security
- Establishing procedures to deal with grievances, and
- Ensuring a better chance of being treated in a fair and just manner in the work environment"

Based on the above perspective, labour relations enable the unions to serve their members including to represent and negotiate for their members' wages. Hence, unions are still relevant to countries like Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, Netherlands, and Sweden although, these are mainly industrial based unions. The terms of employment are determined by collective agreements and it is the case even in South Africa (OECD.Stat, 2015). Unions strive for recognition to remain relevant in the workplace or within an institution so that it would be able to exercise its right and powers to represent its members or constituencies. This paper commences with an introduction briefly discussed in section one above. Under section two, the methodological approach applied in this article is discussed then, followed by section three which

elaborates on the context of the labour unions' recognition at the higher education institutions. Section four covers the analysis on compliance to the legislation and policy by the higher education institutions as experienced by union members. Section five presents the summary of the findings and recommendations whilst concluding remarks are supplied in section six.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodological approach applied in this study is a qualitative research. A qualitative approach helps to investigate experience of unions' members considering that the approach takes the complex social contexts that shape human experience and actions into account (Harisparsad, 2004). The study was carried out from two of the higher education institutions¹ in South Africa and covered only one labour union, viz. the National Education Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU²), which operates in both of the particular higher education institutions examined in this study. In view of the diversity of scope and composition of other unions which operate in these very institutions representing both academic and non-academic employees, the study was limited to only one specific labour union (NEHAWU) which had members represented by the similar labour union in both institutions. This aspect was deliberately chosen to enable the researcher to engage employees or union members on their observations and experiences since they belong to the same labour unions although from two separate institutions which render the same services.

The interviewees were drawn from the list of staff members employed at the two institutions belonging to the same union. A total number of 54 unionized employees participated as respondents. There were 20 respondents from one of the institutions and 34 respondents from the other. Before engaging both the unions' leaders and the unions' members of the two institutions, the researcher made a request to the two labour unions which were both recognized in their institutions. Both labour unions granted permission for their members' participation in the research project. The interview schedule was designed around key themes covering the views, experiences and challenges of the unions' members at the higher education institutions (Stacey, 1969:134).

3. LABOUR UNIONS' RECOGNITION

In both of the higher education institutions examined in this study, the structures of the two institutions consisted of three levels of management. These were top level management, which are the executive body, middle management and lower level management. The executive or top management is the ultimate source of authority managing goals and setting the objectives and policies of the institutions. Middle management consisted of the departmental directors who are

responsible to top management for the functioning of the various departments in the institutions. They execute the plans of the organization in accordance with the policies and directives of top management. Lastly, the lower level management which is concerned with the direction and controlling functions of management. This refers to the managers and supervisors who work largely with personal oversight employees (HRA, 2011).

Middle management is also responsible for interpreting and explaining policies from top level management to the lower level. The union officials can engage with top management, but mainly with middle management. The duties of middle management include establishing plans of action to achieve their goals and determine how these plans should be executed. In performing the organizing function. They decide how the people and resources should be deployed in order to carry out the plans of action. Middle management also establishes the standards of performance.

In both of the institutions where this study was conducted, the structure of the labour unions operates in the same way in both institutions since they are members of the same labour union (NEHAWU). The union members elect shopstewards to represent them in discussions and negotiations with the management. Branch Office Bearers (BOBs) are elected from the group of elected shopstewards. The BOBs serve in four positions or portfolios, namely: the Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson, the Secretary and the Treasure. These four positions or portfolios constitute the Branch Executive Committee (BEC). The BEC reports to the Regional Executive Committee (REC), which is assigned to report to the Provincial Executive Committee (PEC). The PEC in turn reports to the National Executive Committee (NEC), which is the uppermost structure of the National Education Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU) an affiliate to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) (Nehawu, 2015).

Union officials, in particular the BOBs, are entitled to reasonable time off from work to perform their union duties and to undergo union training at convenient times (BIS Acas, 2010). However, NEHAWU did not meet the required threshold (*i.e., a specified maximum or sufficient number of union members counted from the total number of employees within a particular institution*) in one of the institutions investigated, but it met the threshold on the other institution. The union does not qualify for an office if it does not meet the threshold and therefore depend on the institution's goodwill to provide time to the union's BOBs at each instant when the union office work and training has to take place. Part of the operational benefits for recognition is to have an office where members can consult the union about labour matters. The union appoints an administrator or a full-time shopsteward to help the BOBs with the union's office-based operations (NEHAWU, 2010).

Negotiations of an agreement take place through collective bargaining. If an institution or an employer recognizes a labour union in the workplace, it gives the union the opportunity to negotiate the terms and conditions of employment of those workers who subscribe to a defined bargaining unit. The objective of such collective

¹ For ethical considerations, confidentiality and anonymity not to mention the names of the two institutions investigated in this study was maintained. Throughout this paper, these two higher education institutions were referred to as the either the "institutions" or "higher education institutions".

² Permission to conduct the research and engage union members was granted by the union (NEHAWU) and allowed to have its name mentioned.

bargaining is to establish an agreement with the union. This reflects the pluralist perspective whereby the parties, that is, the employer and the employees, agree to work together (BIS Acas, 2010). The relations between management officials and union members can be improved when management assist the union members (who are employees of the institution) to perform their administrative duties (BIS Acas, 2010).

If the labour movement and management of the institution can come together and try to train the shopstewards on how to represent the members in the hearings, I think we would have a good representation of our members (Teddy)³

According to the unions' members, both institutions are in compliance with the country's labour laws and have policies which are in line with the Labour Relations Act, (Act 66 of 1995) (hereafter referred to as the LRA). NEHAWU has full recognition to operate in these institutions through the Organizational Rights Agreement (ORA) also known as the "Recognition Agreement". The ORA is signed by the management of the institutions for which the unions' members work. An agreement between the unions and the institutions recognize the unions' authority to exercise the workers' rights within the institution. As stipulated in the ORA, an employee has the right to be accompanied and to be represented by a unions' representatives during the disciplinary procedure, provided the employee is a member of the union (Jordaan & Stander, 2004:4).

The institution uses the normal Labour Relations policies but they sometimes have some omissions or additions they have in the normal principles of the LRA (Jan)⁴

The labour unions values the existence of the ORA, which is honoured as a legal and binding contractual document allowing the unions to exercise its rights in the workplace. The employers (these higher education institutions) also make use of the agreement. Amendments of the ORA can be made or proposed by either party (organized labour or the employers) in a written form and presented in a meeting.

We follow the recognition agreement, which is amended time and again... The only thing one of the clauses say, is that, if there is a need to amend it, either party must write within thirty days before they actually delete amendments so that they make a proposal to amend the recognition agreement. (Sipho)⁵

In order for the labour unions to qualify to negotiate for its recognition, the labour unions must meet a certain required threshold in a specific institution. Thus, one of the elements which put union at an advantage regarding meeting threshold is that the union receives a different status in their recognition within the institution. This includes that such a union could negotiate amendments in the ORA solely with management excluding other unions' involvement. Fox (1974) and Clegg (1975) argue that by virtue of the employers' ownership and control over employees' delivery of service, they

(employers) enjoy greater power than the organized labour. This means that the union has less or unequal power to ensure negotiation in good faith. In a pluralist environment, negotiating in good faith is the main operating principle of the bargaining relationship. The paradox of pluralism, which management found difficult to accept in some instances, is that they can regain control by sharing it (Flanders, 1975)

Nurse and Devonish (2006) point out that the practice of oppressing, exploiting and reprimanding employees underpins the truth that conflict in the workplace is unavoidable. The only well established and orderly means to resolve conflict in the workplace is through the implementation of grievance and disciplinary procedures. The union representatives regards themselves as ordinary employees who are not experts in labour laws but prepared to create work or develop employment relationships through negotiations with their institutions' management (Flanders, 1975). Flanders (1975) argues that pluralism recognizes that employers and employees may have different interests, but that these need to be reconciled for the organization to function effectively. The principal concern of the pluralist perspective is to ensure that any conflict arising from differences of interest is managed appropriately and is contained to prevent it from causing insecurity and turmoil.

In a unitarist environment, the employer sets up the rules and the employees have to cooperate in complying with these rules. Such institutions flourish where no employee organization or union exists, or, if it does, is not recognized (Van Gramberg, 2002; ILO-A, 2011). When a union is recognized, and is allowed to practice within its rights and to represent its members, the union representatives can find ways to protect members who are involved in disputes, grievances and / or disciplinary procedures (Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Nel & Holtzhausen, 2008).

The significance of the union's recognition by the institution does not seem to be working in favour of the union as perceived by its members. According to union members, the union leadership seems to be taking instructions from management than raising their concerns and protesting labour issues which they feel are not applied according to the legislation. They (union leadership) are actually the body that is legally bound and elected to represent employees for their rights in the workplace.

If the labour unions' leaders were competent enough and can equal the task, equal the skills of the negotiators of the institution, most of the employees will be saved but they are not being saved because they are being represented by uneducated fluke (Euphodiah)⁶

The leadership of the union is exposed to practices of the institutions' management which are challenges to them. The reluctance of union leadership to handle or address such challenges is viewed by the unions' members as failure. To draw and retain union members, an organized labour union leadership is needed. Sing and Bendix (1992:61) suggest that belonging to a union allows its members to participate in labour relations in the

³ Not the real name of the person. A pseudonym was used to protect the identity of the person mentioned by the interviewee.

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workplace as a collective. The capacity of the union leadership is crucial to engaging in negotiations with the management of an organization (Gani, 1996:57). The bargaining power of a labour union depends on a strong membership and a vibrant leadership. In describing the function of a representative, Jordaan and Stander (2004:5) state that such leadership in the workplace ensures that fairness is maintained and that labour relations procedures are followed correctly based on compliance to the institutional policies, labour laws and the legislation.

4. ANALYSIS ON COMPLIANCE TO THE LEGISLATION AND POLICY

In the interest of encouraging justice and good working relations between the employer and the employees to avoid conflict in the workplace, effective legislative procedures and institutional policies must be put into practice. By so doing, the institution enables itself and role-players involved like labour unions to manage conflict and address concerns raised by the workers (Bendix, 1996). This is essential and could work positively in the institution. Labour issues like disciplinary measures in the workplace demonstrates the use of principles of the Code of Good practice known by middle management and lower management of the institution to ensure its effectiveness (BIS Acas, 2010; ILO-A, 2011).

Policies are created by management practices on the day-to-day administration and may be altered in the process of implementation. According to Grossett and Venter (1998:10), the relationship between an institution's management and the union is affected by matters of joint decision-making, especially since internal labour issues are raised if policies are not executed in the proper manner. The relations between the union and the employer are driven by policy practices, which is why the union officials are extremely concerned about the proper execution of the institutions' policies. Based on union officials and union members' insight, the institutions seem to have good policies. However, the unions' members are concerned about the implementation, execution and the practicing of these policies by the institution's management. However, the union officials or representatives whom are supposed to raise the 'unfair practice' up to the labour enforcing entities, find their way difficult in doing so as a result of less knowledgeable union officials who are employees' representatives. As a result, their members suffer the negative consequences.

The institution has got good policies. The only challenge is the implementation thereof. A number of clauses that are within the processes of disciplinary code and procedure are not followed properly in terms of the cases that I have handled until so far (Memme)⁷

In spite of the fact that some union officials are concerned about proper execution of the institution's policies, some of the employees commended the employer for having implemented good labour relation policies. It is the duty of an institution's management to ensure that managers

and supervisors understand the policies and follow appropriate channels in implementing them. Through conducting training sessions and workshops, the institution can show that it is empowering middle and lower management in understanding and executing such policies (HRA, 2011).

Union officials must have clear knowledge of the employment relations' principles and basic knowledge of labour law policies. Importantly, they must know and understand the institution's policy clear as this is where they operate so that they are able to challenge the institution's executive management level or compare the country's applicable labour legislation against what the institutions practices. This would be the union leadership's approach to the executive with clear mandate even from the union members pertaining what their concerns are pertaining unfair, ill treatment and or manipulation of policies by any level of management to which they would demand if that is not rectified.

According to Engelbrecht *et al.* (2008:1), when justice is a core value of an organization's management principle and is enacted through a set of internal management practices, it builds a culture of justice and a system-wide commitment which is valuable and unique to the employees and leads ultimately to a competitive advantage. Thus, labour union representatives strongly emphasize that procedural justice in the workplace is important for employee behaviour in the sense that employees are more likely to accept responsibilities if the related procedures are fair. Such conduct in the workplace leads to employee satisfaction and fair outcomes.

The unions' members' understanding of the ORA is that labour matters including disciplinary issues are dealt with between the employer and employee at first level. Only when the internal avenues have been exhausted, then consideration of alternative channels is then put into place. This could include lawyers and or external bodies. With regard to procedural justice, the participants in this study (both union officials and ordinary members) made the following claims due to the fact that they perceived the employers to be acting unfairly when including lawyers to initiate any disciplinary matter.

The institution uses competent, highly qualified attorneys and advocates to initiate the cases. There is unfair balance of power. The labour union is not knowledgeable, it doesn't have, even the basic course one, first year level or second year level of labour law. This attorney is a qualified man and is practicing and is specializing in labour law. So there, you see, there is a mismatch (Dalton)⁸

Employers may have an influence on the pace and nature of the changes made within the workplace, but the labour unions retain their bargaining power to make some strategic choices (Boxall & Haynes, 1997:567). Labour unions or its representatives can escalate the disputes matters up to any external bodies in seeking professional help through following appropriate processes. The institutions where labour unions operate could not challenge or rather have power to stop them in so doing.

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Some line managers or supervisors when confronted on questions which are based on whether or not they treat their subordinates different based e.g., race issues, they tend to be emotional and do not respond based on facts but simply based on anger (John)⁹

By and large, middle managers' competences could be linked to the functions demanded by their particular jobs. Union members perceived being treated inferior by their superiors who are in the middle and lower management. According to union official and union members' view and experience, this showed an unequal treatment of employees. One of the union officials and a union member made the following remarks:

The transmission of information to the top management above the supervisor is not adequate and then who fails here, the heads of department or heads of certain sections fails to take drastically steps against their supervisors. I mean, that is why some of the supervisors will act as if they own the place, they own the section, they own the institution (Calvin)¹⁰

In recapping the union officials' and union members' views, it is clear that even though there is a working relationship between some subordinates and their superiors, racial boundaries occur in the workplace. Given these views, some union members perceive the unequal and undeserved treatment from their line managers as based on race rather than any other conduct between a subordinate and superior.

The union leadership ensures that any mandate from the members is taken seriously and that the members' demands regarding employment conditions are considered (De Vos *et al.*, 2007:607). The question on worker protection was asked from a social protection perspective to assess whether the union representatives were doing enough and were offering enough protection when representing union members on issues of labour or disputes. Half of the total number of interviewed respondents indicated that the labour unions had done insufficient work in this regard. As a result, the unions' members were dissatisfied with the protection they had received from their unions' representatives. Union members felt strongly that the union must represent them (members) at their interest.

The labour union represents members since it is there because of membership - if the membership falls, the union will not exist. It is the member, not the individual who is representing the case. The union represents the interest of the members (Morongwe)¹¹ [Partially translated]¹²

It is noteworthy that, in line with the legal requirements and the capacity of unions' officials or union representatives, the representations of unions' members was viewed as the issue most likely to require careful examination. In this regard, the role

of unions' representatives is deemed a prominent factor.

5. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Rubin (1983:5) notes that qualitative findings must be transformed into ideas and concepts that can be used in determining action. The findings have a special relevance and message for union leaders who would have to be vigilant about driving the union to the right or positive direction. In this study, it was found that more attention needs to be paid in educating union officials as well as ordinary members of the union regarding the basic rights of labour matters in the workplace.

It became clear in this study that the more satisfied union members could be - the more membership could be gained by the union. The whole concept was about managing expectations of union members and making them understand what is realistic of being represented by a union. Such outcomes could improve the level of union membership and attitude towards the labour union's performance as Gordon *et al.* (1995:351) pronounce that the ability and charge rest with the union leaders in discussing the challenges facing organized labour. The main duty and objective of union leaders is to help protect the members and negotiate a meaningful role in the employment relationship. Union officials should be capable of serving employers and assisting them in handling pressure in the workplace, while at the same time being cautious and aware of the interests of their members as they relate to the practice of fairness and security in the workplace.

Saundry and Antcliff, (2006) portend that previous research work from Edwards' (1995) analysis suggested that in certain work environments, a certain number of workers from a different racial cluster are likely linked to dismissal charges. Based on the views of both union officials and union members, whom were mainly blacks, they seem to have gauged themselves low pertaining level of employment rights when compared with their white counterparts who mostly appears to be their superiors. Evidence to this statement reflects some comments made by interviewees regarding issues of their dissatisfaction and feeling of unequal treatment based on race. It therefore, must be made clear why it was mainly black people who were interviewed in this study and less or no white person formed part of the respondents. Even though NEHAWU is a non-racial labour union, however, in both institutions where this study was conducted, NEHAWU primarily represents black people whereas there are other rival labour unions representing mainly white and less black people in both institutions.

The responses and attitudes from the union members were perceived to be what Dworkin (1984:67) summarizes that, an individual's distribution of response is a function of the preference of others and himself or herself. This happens as a result of lacking trust and doubting the capacity of unions' representatives from the unions' members. In this case, better knowledgeable and qualified unions' representatives could be deployed by the labour unions to represent

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¹¹ Not the real name of the person. A pseudonym was used to protect the identity of the person mentioned by the interviewee.

¹² *"Mokgailho waba bereki o 'representa' maloko* because the union is there because of the membership - if the membership falls, the union will not exist. the member, not the individual who's representing the case. The union represents the interest of the members' (Union Member - Ordinary. responding in Sepedi and English).

members in order to pose appropriate challenge to the institutions' management and build trust to their own members.

A recommendation could thus be made that, given the situation and challenges faced by union in the both institutions, union officials should undergo induction and workshops which are facilitated by the unions' upper structures like NEHAWU's REC, PEC or even their NEC level. This will assist the union leadership at various institutions to understand processes and operations on how collective bargaining operates. Moreover, the unions' leadership will be well trained to handle labour matters at the satisfaction of their members in the workplace.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

A notion drawn from this study is that, ordinary unions' members did not have access to adequate number of unions' officials or shopstewards to handle their concerns on labour matters to their (unions' members) satisfaction. Moreover, unions' representatives who represent members are not competent and knowledgeable enough as expected or supposed to be against the management of their institutions which affirms Nurse and Devonish's (2006) similar suggestions. From comments made by union members and officials, it was clear that legislation was applied in the institution; hence the unions were recognized and the country's labour laws were acknowledged and applied as regulated by the Constitution of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) and the LRA. The policies of the institutions were constituted to be in line with the regulatory procedures as defined in the legislation. In this regard, there both institutions where NEHAWU operates, there is an existing ORA recognizing the unions. Employees are authorized to exercise their workers' rights within the institutions.

It appeared on the surface, as reported by the interviewees, that both institutions had clear policies pertaining labour matters and dispute issues like grievance and disciplinary procedures. However, the institutions' management was reported on occasion as doing very little to accommodate the union and its members, making the negotiations difficult and detrimental to the unions. In this regard, management is seen to be manipulative rather than advancing employees and employer relations. This highlights the question of the balance of power between the employer and the union, which is a criticism of pluralism put forward by Fox (1974) and Clegg (1975).

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