A FOOTNOTE TO HISTORY

The activities and initiatives of an employers’ association are not the usual stuff of History. At best, they are a footnote to the wider trends and upheavals that influence the course of event. They are, however, welcome material for the scrutiny of sociologists and anthropologist.

Mauritian society has evolved since I assumed the presidency of the Mauritius Employer’s Federation (MEF) and manners and more, to say nothing of ethics, are no longer the same. Thirty-five years on, social relations are more relaxed and friendly and “Mauritianism” has progressed, although not as much or as fast as one would have wished.

But the recent confrontation between the sugar industry and trade unions suggests that in the arena of labour relations not much has changed. My days at the head of the MEF saw wildcat strikes in the sugar industry, public transport and the docks. SILU, UASI, GWF, among other unions, were on the warpath.

True enough, wages were low and it was a hard life for those at the bottom of the wages ladder. But the cost of living was less manageable as our wants were simple. Today’s wage levels are higher proportionately, but our needs are more sophisticated and expensive, with a lifestyle that has increasingly become the norm, due to social mobility.

The Union leaders of our worker’s organizations are also more sophisticated but less well-educated than their forebears of the 1970’s... MMM leadership of Trade Unions was nothing if not more literate. Methods have not changed, however, and approaches are remarkably similar: selective use of statistics, emphasis on the “here and now” – not on long term planning, refusal of a larger perspective in which to place demands and, above all, an isolated case that mainly focuses on wages regardless of the global situation.

Yet, we all know that the revenue gap between the top brass and the foot of the heap has widened, that when bank managers earn up to 2 million a month while artisans struggle for less than Rs.10 thousand, that the cost of living is a permanent Damocles sword for workers, that social aspirations and life styles require a structural adjustment that aims to close the salary gap and enable the bulk of the population to afford a better balance between their earnings and their hopes for their family.

The popular perception that the state, with the colossal wastage of public funds though hedging, fraud, mismanagement, the perks of office in terms of limousines, foreign travel, the opulent life of sugar barons and captains applied at their expense coupled with the stale argument about productivity, year after year, when the work environment is often not conductive to higher input.

The Mauritian private sector seems condemned to the ritual of the regular annual shadow boxing match between management and trade unions with neither side inclined to look beyond their immediate goals. Employers have much to answer for, because they are supposed to be professionally trained.

The responsibility rests on management to communicate better, to foster a greater understanding of business mechanics, to emphasize its social objective of a more equitable society in terms of salary and welfare policies over the longer term, and above all, that it takes its human capital, fundamental to its success, seriously, and is sincere in working out a genuine partnership with its work-force. Future
stability is at this price, otherwise the tug of war will continue unabated, with attendant risks for industrial peace and social stability, as economic justice will not be seen to be done... For this justice to be done, both sides need more enlightened leadership.

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Chairman, 1977 & 1978