

STATE OF LABOUR RELATIONS: THE VALUE OF MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

By Katishi Masemola
General Secretary
Food and Allied Workers Union

SYNOPSIS

The Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), as with many other unions, find itself in a paradoxical situation in which, on the one hand, they are a fierce competitor to shareholders as represented by executive and management and, on the other, they are in a partnership with management in which they seek to preserve companies from collapsing.

Willing competitor because, as we represent interest of members when we push for increased wages and improved working conditions and benefits this is in competition to shareholders wanting an increased rate of return on investment (ROI) from executives and managers.

Reluctant partner because, despite the above, we know we must somewhat work together with management to ensure that operations are in good health given that these jobs are a source of livelihoods for members.

However, in many cases, the absence of useful information-sharing, especially of financial nature, does not result in meaningful engagement embarked upon and does not therefore give value to dialogue.

This paper argues that at the heart of healthy industrial relations is meaningful dialogue and useful exchange of information.

Equally critical, healthy industrial relations, from our perspective, can only be achieved if business leadership, the directors and executive, can recognize and accept that labour unions are there to maximize increased wages and improved working conditions for their members in addition to advancing job security against retrenchments and dismissals.

This is in conflict with their role, which role is to strive for increased shareholder value, including among others, profit increment through efficiency upscaling and cost reduction, which includes labour as an input cost.

Given the rising remuneration disparities, be it a function of the labour market factors such as skills shortage and/or low-skills jobs or other factors, feeding into the social inequalities, this 'conflict' or 'tension' will be persist and the art is to allow meaningful dialogue to deal with the situation.