



CRITICISM IS NOT A STRATEGY

Fear is a powerful motivator. It attracts attention, shapes perceptions and, if repeated often enough, becomes accepted as fact. Read enough of NEASA's newsletters and one quickly begins to recognise a familiar pattern. The subject may change, but the conclusion almost never does. Whether the issue is collective bargaining, employment costs, bargaining council agreements or government policy, employers are invariably led to believe that somewhere along the line, SEIFSA is to blame.

NEASA's latest newsletters are no exception.

Those of us concerned with certainty and stability in the metals and engineering industry welcomed the successful conclusion of the 2024 three-year Settlement Agreement between SEIFSA's affiliated Associations and the industry's trade unions. After all, it was only the sixth three-year Agreement concluded in SEIFSA's 83-year history and, significantly, the first to be concluded without the loss of a single day to industrial action and in record time. For employers, this represented certainty, predictability and industrial stability. For NEASA, however, it represented yet another opportunity to launch an attack on SEIFSA and, by implication, the very institutions that have underpinned collective bargaining in our industry for decades.

There is, of course, nothing improper about disagreement. Employer organisations should challenge ideas, policies and negotiating positions. Robust debate is not only healthy, it is essential. The difficulty arises when criticism ceases to be a means of advancing debate and becomes an end in itself.

That is what distinguishes NEASA's approach.

Rather than advancing a clearly articulated vision for the future of the metals and engineering industry, its commentary repeatedly returns to the same proposition: that the source of the industry's problems lies with SEIFSA, the bargaining council, organised labour or government. The protagonists may change. The accusation rarely does.

This is unfortunate because it diverts attention from the debate employers should really be having.

The question is not whether NEASA has the right to criticise the existing collective bargaining framework. It undoubtedly does. Every institution should be open to scrutiny and every employer organisation has the right to challenge arrangements it believes no longer serve the interests of business.



The real question is a different one.

Does criticism, on its own, amount to a strategy?

That is the question employers should be asking as they read yet another NEASA newsletter.

There is little wonder, then, that when one objectively surveys almost thirty years of NEASA's participation in the Metals and Engineering Industries Bargaining Council, a more fundamental question presents itself.

What has NEASA's philosophy delivered to the employers it claims to represent?

Collective agreements continue to be negotiated, concluded and, where the statutory requirements are met, extended. The Bargaining Council, notwithstanding repeated predictions of its demise and sustained attempts to undermine it, continues to function. The centralised collective bargaining model remains the framework within which the overwhelming majority of employers and employees conduct industrial relations.

Whether one agrees with every outcome is not the issue. No institution is beyond criticism and no system should be immune from scrutiny. The issue is whether those calling for its replacement have presented a credible and workable alternative.

If NEASA believes the existing collective bargaining framework has failed, employers are entitled to know what should replace it. How would that alternative improve competitiveness? How would it provide greater certainty? How would it better protect employment? How would it balance the interests of large and small employers while maintaining labour market stability? Most importantly, how would it command the confidence of employers, organised labour and Government alike?

These are not abstract questions. They go to the heart of responsible employer representation.

It is relatively easy to identify shortcomings in existing institutions. It is considerably more difficult to build better ones. Every employer organisation has the right to oppose agreements it believes are not in the interests of business. What it does not have is the luxury of opposing without proposing.

Ultimately, employers do not judge organisations by the number of institutions they oppose or the volume of criticism they generate. They judge them by the certainty they create, the outcomes they negotiate and the practical value they deliver to the businesses they represent.

That is the standard against which every employer organisation, including SEIFSA, should be measured.

This is where NEASA's argument begins to lose its force.

Over the years employers have become familiar with its recurring narrative. We are repeatedly told that the problem lies in the so-called cosy relationship between SEIFSA and organised labour; that collective bargaining has been captured by "captains of industry"; that smaller employers have somehow been abandoned; and that SEIFSA's affiliated Associations are little more than "empty shells."

Those allegations are well known.

What remains considerably less clear is the alternative.

If collective bargaining is fundamentally flawed, what system should replace it? If the Bargaining Council has outlived its usefulness, what institution should take its place? If industry representation is supposedly broken, what model does NEASA propose that would better serve employers, particularly the thousands of small and medium-sized businesses it claims to represent?

These are not rhetorical questions.

They are precisely the questions employers should be asking.

Employer organisations exist to improve the environment in which businesses operate. They should challenge policies that hinder competitiveness, influence legislation, negotiate sustainable agreements and provide practical leadership during periods of uncertainty. They should not merely explain why existing institutions have failed. They should demonstrate how better institutions can be built.

That is where NEASA's argument falls short.

It has every right to oppose the current collective bargaining framework. It has every right to disagree with bargaining council agreements and to challenge the positions adopted by SEIFSA, organised labour or government. What it does not have is the luxury of opposing without proposing.

Employers deserve more than a catalogue of grievances. They deserve a clear vision of what comes next. If existing institutions are to be dismantled, employers are entitled to know what will replace them, how those alternatives will operate and why they will produce better outcomes than the system currently in place.

Leadership is ultimately measured not by the institutions one opposes, but by the confidence one inspires and the solutions one advances.

For the record, SEIFSA does not negotiate on its own behalf. Every position adopted at the bargaining table is derived from mandates received from its sixteen affiliated employer Associations. Nor is it true that SEIFSA represents only large employers. Quite the contrary. Sixty-six per cent of companies belonging to our affiliated Associations employ fewer than fifty people. Small employers are not an

afterthought. They constitute the overwhelming majority of our constituency and their interests remain central to every negotiating mandate we receive.

None of this suggests that the metals and engineering industry is without challenges. Employers continue to grapple with weak economic growth, rising operating costs, declining competitiveness and an increasingly uncertain business environment. These are real challenges, and they deserve serious debate. They also deserve serious leadership.

Never underestimate the power of the negative. Fear attracts attention. It generates headlines, fills inboxes and undoubtedly wins supporters. But fear has never concluded a collective agreement. It has never secured industrial peace. It has never strengthened an industry.

Industries are built differently.

They are built by employers and employees prepared to engage with one another, by representatives willing to negotiate rather than posture, and by institutions capable of producing certainty even when agreement is difficult and compromise uncomfortable. That work is rarely glamorous. It seldom attracts headlines. It is; however, how lasting outcomes are achieved.

Ultimately, employers will decide which philosophy better serves their interests.

One philosophy seeks opportunity in uncertainty and sees value in opposing almost every institution that shapes industrial relations.

The other accepts that institutions are imperfect, but believes they are strengthened through engagement, negotiation and continuous improvement rather than perpetual opposition.

SEIFSA made that choice more than eighty years ago.

We have no intention of changing course.

Lucio Trentini
Executive Director