

## **TRADE UNIONS AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN AFRICA: NEW ALLIANCES, STRATEGIES AND PARTNERSHIPS<sup>1</sup>**

**By Edward Webster**

Trade unions in Africa have a long tradition of political engagement, beginning with their involvement in the anti-colonial movements through to present day struggles for democracy. Their historical engagement in politics has been divided into three phases. The first phase was marked by a common struggle against colonialism where close ties were developed between trade unions and the national liberation movements. Trade unions, while being important actors, usually played the role of junior partners to political parties, without developing an autonomous social agenda outside and beyond the struggle for political independence.

The second phase begins with independence and the introduction of state-led projects which rapidly expanded jobs in the public sector. During this phase formal union rights were often protected in theory but in practice unions were subordinated to dominant parties, losing an autonomous capacity to intervene politically. Instead unions were expected to play a dualistic role: first, that of aiding with overall national development, and second, the representation of the job interests of the rank and file members. The argument for this reversal of the primary role of unions to be developmental rather than representational was based on the government belief that trade unions only represent a proportion of the labour force of these countries.

A third phase, the phase of market regulation, began in the nineties. Faced by widespread state indebtedness incurred during the seventies and eighties, governments during this phase came under pressure from the International Financial Institutions to adjust their budgets in line with the neo-liberal orthodoxy of fiscal austerity. Widespread job losses took place under these Structural Adjustment Programmes and most unions sought to disengage from the state-corporatist order which seemed to have lost its capacity to deliver. As trade unions began to resist retrenchments, cuts in wages, privatisation, and the deterioration of social services, the labour movement emerged as a significant opponent of the one-party states that had come to characterise post-colonial Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is a summary of the debates during a conference on "Trade Unions and Politics: Africa in a comparative context", jointly organised in Johannesburg on July 21-22, 2006 by the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Zimbabwe, the Politics of Development Group at Stockholm University and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The conference brought together African scholars and union activists.

I would also like to acknowledge Bjorn Beckman's report on this conference in the November 2006 Newsletter of RC44, the Research Committee on Labour Movements for the International Sociological Association. The organisers of the conference, Professor Bjorn Beckman, Sakhela Buhlungu and Lloyd Sachikonye will be publishing selected papers from this conference in a forthcoming edited manuscript.

A crucial part of the demands of these unions was for greater autonomy as well as influence on the direction of government policies. Indeed, unions have been at the centre of the widespread challenges to authoritarian governments throughout contemporary Africa. Thus, paradoxically, in spite of their weakness, unions are often feared by post-colonial governments.

To examine this changing relationship between the trade union movement and political parties we take a comparative approach to union-party relations in four regions of the continent, namely, Southern Africa, East Africa, West Africa and North Africa.

Three questions on the relationship between trade unions and political parties have to be raised:

- How can unions advance their political influence while simultaneously protecting their autonomy?
- More specifically, how successful have unions been in advancing autonomy and influence when they are closely allied to national political parties?
- Are alternative ways of influencing politics emerging?

## KEY FINDINGS

In looking at seven country studies (see footnote on Page 1 and list of countries in table), several conclusions emerge.

Despite the seemingly universal trend during this phase of market regulation toward a 'loosening' of union-party alliances, we can identify considerable variation across the seven cases with respect to both the extent and the nature of the relationship between unions and politics. While the proportion of the population in formal wage employment remains small and diminishing, unions remain a political force to be reckoned with. Unlike advocacy groups and NGOs, their membership base and strategic location in the economy, especially in transport and key public ser-

vices, gives them the capacity to mobilise and disrupt on a country-wide basis. Also, unlike advocacy groups, trade unions are not issue based. As a result organised labour is capable of offering voice and leadership to a wide range of popular forces.

But this does not mean that trade unions are surrogate political parties. Nor is labour necessarily capable of building a parliamentary constituency of its own. Instead, the combination of global forces and internal struggles in post-colonial Africa, are leading to a re-conceptualisation of labour's historic relationship with governing political parties opening up opportunities for new alliances, strategies and partnerships. This reconfiguration of union-party relationships is illustrated in the four ideal types in the table on top of the next Page.

### 1. The traditional client model

Being historically part of the nationalist camp, many unions continue to be closely allied to nationalist political parties. Both Senegal and Egypt fall into this category.

In Senegal each party on the 'Left' has had its own affiliated trade unions, although the defeat of the ruling Socialist Party at the polls in 2000 accelerated a move towards greater union autonomy. In Senegal intense debates have emerged within the labour movement around how best to influence government policy: Should they fight from a basis of greater union unity and autonomy or should they seek party political alliances to ensure better access to policy makers?

In some cases, as in Egypt, unions remain incorporated into authoritarian ruling party structures, deprived of both autonomy and influence. But evidence is available that the client relationship with the ruling party has led to workers' grievances and concerns being expressed at enterprise level. This has resulted in frequent informal stoppages and the emergence of networks of activists along side the official structures.

## UNION-PARTY RELATIONS IN POST COLONIAL AFRICA

Relation Trade Union – Political Party	Countries
Traditional client model: Labour remains a client of the ruling party.	Egypt, Senegal
Divorce: Labour moves out of the alliance and forms its own party as part of the opposition. This either fails to take place, as in the case of Nigeria, or in the case of Zambia and Zimbabwe, labour initiates a political party but stands back once it is formed.	Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria
Unhappy marriage: Labour has an uneasy alliance with the ruling party. In South Africa unions are not directly represented in parliament while in Uganda unions elect MPs to parliament but they are not accountable to the unions.	South Africa, Uganda
Abstinance: Labour withdraws from party politics and a multiparty democracy is created. Trade unions play a leading role in civil society.	Ghana, South Africa

### 2. Divorce from the nationalist alliance and formation of an oppositional labour party

To some the formation of a 'Labour Party' directly linked to the trade union movement is assumed to be the 'natural' means by which unions can influence politics, not the least in view of the European experience of a strong link between social democratic and communist parties and the organised labour movement. However the evidence from our case studies is that the African experience is different; while attempts by labour to form a political party have taken place in Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Zambia, they have not led to enduring relationships neither has the state being willing to tolerate such a relationship.

Unions in Zimbabwe are a case in point. Although instrumental in the formation in 1999 of the oppositional Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) is not part of it. The multi-class basis of the MDC is reflected in its ideological outlook which is largely supportive of liberalisation of the economy. The Zimbabwean government has sought to undermine the ZCTU, both through arresting, detaining and harassing its leadership, as well as by encouraging and funding rival 'suitcase unions'. However in spite of hostility to the ZCTU, the federation remains committed to social dialogue through participation in the Tripartite Negotiating Forum in an attempt to stabilise society and the economy. The challenge facing the ZCTU is to balance this dual agenda of defending itself against violent harassment and intimidation while trying to seek social dialogue with employers and government.

In Nigeria, a long tradition of union political involvement has generated a succession of unsuccessful 'Labour Parties'. Since the return of civil rule in 1999, there have been repeated confrontations with the state where the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) has demonstrated a wide popular following, especially over the pricing of local petroleum products. It has failed, however, to transform its undoubted political clout into effective parliamentary involvement.

### 3. Unhappy marriage where labour retains an uneasy alliance with the governing party

In the South African case the leading union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), is aligned to the ruling party, but retains considerable autonomy and influence. Contrary to constant speculation that this Alliance is about to break up, research among COSATU members reveals that they continue to show strong support for the Triple Alliance, the ruling African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP), and COSATU. Although COSATU is in a uniquely strong position in the continent, it does share its problems with unions elsewhere where a union-backed government has come to power and has implemented neo-liberal economic and social policies. It is also experiencing the informalisation of work, making it imperative for unions to reach out both to the wider population of workers and to the organisations in civil society outside the ANC camp.

In Uganda the trade union leadership retain an alliance with the governing Museveni regime and seats are reserved for trade unions in parliament. But unions lack autonomy and the parliamentarians are compelled to toe the government line. The result is the emergence of a patron-client relationship between the governing party and the union representatives. A feature of Uganda was the recent introduction of more progressive labour laws as a condition of the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), a preferential trading arrangement. Interestingly, these

changes were not the result of local union pressure but pressure from the United States government for the recognition of international labour standards.

### 4. Abstinance: In Ghana unions have explicitly disengaged from party politics

The policy of non-association was adopted in 1992 and incorporated into the constitution of the Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC). This decision was taken partly from past experience with Nkrumah's Convention Peoples Party (CPP) but also arising from unsuccessful attempts by the GTUC to form a party of its own. Although the GTUC has not succeeded in shifting government policies from its neoliberal direction, they have taken the lead in civil society and succeeded in stopping the privatisation of water. By not aligning with a political party labour has been able to win public space. This is in contrast to those unions which have tried to form an oppositional party; and to those unions which are subordinated to the ruling party, as exists in the client model.

It is worth noting that in South Africa both the Federation of Democratic Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA) and the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) are also politically non-aligned.

## POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

What are the political implications of these findings? I would identify four:

- In the era of market regulation it is necessary to rethink the historic alliances that have existed between labour and political parties.

Trade unions in post colonial Africa have, until recently, tended to rely on their alliances with ruling parties in trying to influence public policy. This preoccupation with political parties has, for example, led to the divisive involvement of COSATU in the debate on who is to succeed President Thabo Mbeki as the

President of South Africa. This close identification of union leaders with specific camps has split unions, and the federation as a whole, down the middle. Many affiliates are divided into two camps and are unable to get on with the core activities of a union because of a breakdown of trust between union leaders.

The evidence from the country studies is that unions in Africa are rethinking their approach to politics, a rethink in which unions rely less on their alliance with the ruling party – what could be called a political alliance – to a focus on building coalitions with other organisations in civil society, such as women's organisations, organisations of the self employed, NGOs and informal economy organisations. I would distinguish such horizontal alliances, or social alliances, from the vertical, or political alliances, between unions and governing parties. From this perspective, political engagement is not reducible to party political affiliation. Indeed, if labour's autonomy with respect to political parties is a concern, then alliances with civil society organisations can provide an alternative way of engaging in political activity.

It is clear from the experience of the formation of the MDC in Zimbabwe and the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) in Zambia, that forming a political party is a difficult choice to make. In the Zambian case the unions have been disappointed with the performance of the MMD in government and have been dumped by the government they helped to bring into power. In both Zambia and Zimbabwe the unions withdrew once they had helped establish these parties.

- Labour has the capacity to blunt neo-liberal policies but is not able to present an alternative set of economic and social policies.

What is clear from all seven case studies is that labour in Africa, as in countries world-wide, does not have the capacity or the programmatic vision to provide an alternative to this phase of market driven politics. At best we were able to identify examples of where labour has been able to blunt neo-liberal policies, as

in the case of Ghana over water privatisation, or in South Africa where the transport union was able to prevent the privatisation of the railways. But in large part labour is involved in defensive politics where its interventions have no impact on the macroeconomic policies that underpin the neo-liberal paradigm.

Given the strength that capital now wields in the global economy it makes sense to develop a multi-pronged approach to the sources of power that labour can draw on. In addition to traditional sources of power – workplace bargaining and social dialogue – there is a need to identify the new sources of power that have emerged in the global economy. This involves an extension of links in a horizontal direction to the community as well as drawing on international pressure such as codes of conduct to promote fair labour standards or, more centrally, on the commodity chains that link Africa to the global economy. Value chain analysis has the potential to ground the development of unions in the real world of working people. It offers the opportunity to understand better how workers at different points in the chain of production may have different access to a 'ladder of protection'. Conventional value chain analysis can be broadened and enriched to include what has been called a 'labour benefit approach'.

- Labour has, and continues to play, a central role in the struggle for democracy in Africa.

Unlike established democracies, post-colonial African countries are engaged in the complex task of nation-building and economic reconstruction. As a result, a very distinct culture of 'us' and 'them' develops, whereby people are accepted as 'one of us' (a comrade or a veteran) on the basis of their commitment to national liberation. Those who oppose the government become 'the enemy' or even 'counter-revolutionaries'. In other words, the margins of tolerance are much lower in such situations as democracy has not been consolidated. The result is, as the Zimbabwean case illustrates, not institutionalized opposition by the MDC and its trade union counterpart, the ZCTU, but open and violent confrontation with a

union-backed opposition becoming the focus of organised violence by the Zimbabwean state.

However, the existence of strong trade unions has historically been central to the creation of a democratic order. Labour in Africa, as was the case in Europe and North America, has been at the forefront of the struggle to maintain democratic institutions and democratic rule. Vibrant militant independent trade unions, it can be argued, are the most important bulwark against authoritarianism. Furthermore, after a long period of little new investment in Africa, recent years has seen the growth of investment, and more controversially, the dramatic increase in Chinese investment in Africa. And where capital invests, labour follows, including struggles around the recognition of trade union rights and democratic rule.

- Labour needs to develop new partnerships with research entities and universities to engage and contest the neo-liberal ideas that have become the dominant paradigm in the International Financial Institutions.

The power of labour does not only lie in its strategic location in the workplace and its capacity to mobilise and organise, but also in the power of ideas and its ability to present ideas that challenge market-driven development and provide alternatives that point towards a more labour friendly global order. There is evidence that the labour movement is beginning to connect more directly with research entities and the universities to start to develop alternatives. Both labour and universities have tended to approach each other in rather instrumental ways; labour when it needs research to support its campaigns and researchers when they need access and support for their funding proposals. But a true partnership rests on reciprocity and a willingness to learn from each other.

The Global Labour University (GLU) and the Global University Research Network (GURN) are examples of new partnerships between educational institutions and workers' organisations that could form a joint global learning, research and discussion network. These partnerships aim to engage with trade unions and universities to develop new university curricula that broaden the debate and knowledge base of labour issues in universities<sup>2</sup>.

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2 The conference on Unions and Parties: Africa in Comparative Perspective was an important step in this direction. It provided a forum for scholars and researchers to share information, concepts and theories with the lived experience of those engaged in formulating and implementing the tactics and strategies that ultimately will determine whether a strong democratic labour movement is built in Africa.

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**Additional literature:**

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