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African Trade Unions in Historical Perspective

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Introduction

Trade unions are essentially bargaining organizations. Their role is to represent workers' interests vis-à-vis employers and governments. They work within a national legal framework that regulates industrial relations and labour laws. Therefore, they can only represent workers that are legally recognised as such. To have legal recognition, workers must have a contract and must pay taxes - the same is true for the employers that are on the other side of the bargaining table. Modern national legal frameworks only conceive and legally recognise labour in the form of free wage labour. This paper seeks to explore what other roles - other than that of bargaining organisations for restricted number of workers - trade unions have played in African societies, both political and economic in the twentieth century.

As a starting point, it is important to identify the defining characteristics of labour organizations in the African continent. Trade unionism is certainly a recent development in African labour history and it coincides with the history of the development of the capitalist mode of production in the continent (Phelan, 2011; Kraus, 2007; Kester, 2007). Although there were some instances of trade unionism in the early decades of the twentieth century, the vast majority of formalised organizations aimed at protecting the rights of African wage workers only came into being towards the end of the 1940s and the early 1950s. The birth of these nascent trade unions was to a large extent a result of the first forms of "proletarianization" generated during colonialism (Schler *et al.*, 2011: 1).

Before the Second World War (WWII), trade unions lacked real power to improve workers' conditions, but, unlike recent times, early unionists' projects were more ambitious than today's: early African unionists (pre-WWII) tried to develop an African working class consciousness. Workers' unions were fighting for their own legal recognition; but their range of activities did not go beyond the working class of urban areas and mining districts.

During the period of decolonisation, from the 1940s onwards, as African wage workers increased in numbers and anti-colonial ideals spread throughout the continent, trade unions increased their power, their membership, their means of action, their importance within the political arena etc. However, as explained in 1966 by Ian Davies, in his seminal book *African Trade Unions*, Africans employed as manual workers or longshoremen still

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represented a tiny minority within the African working population and were, as a matter of fact, seen as a sort of elite when compared to the vast majority of the rural population whose work was exploited in reciprocal, collective, household, slave or other type of servile forms (Davies, 1966). In this connection, the concept of “labour aristocracy”, a notion coined by Lenin and applied to the African context by Giovanni Arrighi and John Saul, started to be used from the 1970s (Arrighi and Saul, 1968; Waterman, 1975). According to the labour aristocracy notion, unionised workers in African countries constituted a privileged minority - with written contracts, fixed salaries, pensions etc. - whose economic and social conditions had improved at the expense of the great majority of the rural population and the urban poor employed in the much larger informal sector (Arrighi, 1973). A counter-argument, and a less radical one, was advanced by Sandbrook and Cohen (1975). They noticed that, with the growing migration of workers from rural to urban and mining areas, a massive change in the composition of the African labour force had taken place in many regions from South Africa to Egypt, from Kenya to Tanzania, from Ghana to Nigeria. The proletarianisation process was so large that it produced a substantial working class. This African working class, which included the “lumpen proletarians” and the so-called “working poor”, can hardly be seen as an “aristocracy”. Indeed, this new phenomenon made Arrighi and Saul partially reconsider their original thesis on trade unions as actors in the creation of a labour aristocracy.

The debate on trade unions and their role in the world of labour has continued, and reverted to the question of trade union typology. In fact, trade unions are not homogenous organisations and African trade unions are no exception. These organisations can be very different from one another depending on their character and their relationship to the struggle between labour and capital, between workers and employers. In his famous work *Workers of the World*, Marcel van der Linden presciently pointed out that trade unions can be divided into categories according to the recourse they make to strikes and confrontational, radical activity (van der Linden, 2008). Van der Linden explains in more detail as follows. “Classified according to their frequency of resorting to strikes, we can distinguish broadly between unions that exist exclusively, or almost exclusively, to organize strikes; unions that organize strikes, but serve other purposes as well; and unions intended to prevent strikes where possible. Given that, apart from autonomous trade unions where the members have a direct or indirect say, there are also heteronomous trade unions ultimately controlled by employers or third parties, we obtain the following typology” (van der Linden, 2008: 225). Union can be identified also by their degree of autonomy from the employer and their degree of radical activism. Their success in winning rights for the workers might depend on how unions are capable to jostle between these conditions (see Tab. 01). An analysis of the character or typology of African trade unions is probably the best methodological first step for the understanding workers organisations. Therefore, to appreciate the role of African trade unions and their history as well as their role in the history of Africa, one might want to keep in mind the importance of the general typology highlighted by van der Linden. It is possible to see that some Africa unions can be defined as “yellow” unions, or workers’ organisation which are controlled by the employer or the state or the political party in power. These unions are not autonomous and do not engage in strike or other forms of unrest. On the contrary, other unions might be very independent from both institutional politics and employers. These are called “spontaneous” or “mushroom” unions. Typical of this category of unions are revolutionary or anarcho-syndicalist workers organisations. Between these two extreme, it is possible to place all unions. Analysing which typology of union is most effective to promote workers’ rights and their position vis-à-vis employers is a more complex issue.

Table 01
General Typology of Trade Unions

	<i>Autonomy</i>	<i>Heteronomy</i>
<i>Strikes</i>	Revolutionary syndicalism “Mushroom” unions	--
<i>Not only strikes</i>	Craft societies - Bargaining unions	Autocratic unions - Racket unions
<i>No strikes</i>	--	“Yellow” unions

Source: Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, (2008), p. 225.

The aim of this essay is to give a general description of the history of trade unionism in Africa, starting from two assumptions, first, that trade unionism is a complex phenomenon in which many different types of organisations operated and, second, that the history of African trade unionism does not coincide with African labour history. Indeed, as trade unions can be characterised as political or institutional actors, their history is at the confluence of political and economic history. The division between the colonial and post-colonial periods is admittedly subject to criticism, in as much as it can potentially reflect Eurocentrism and deny African agency. Therefore it is treated with care throughout the article. A special attention is given to the decolonisation period. It is undeniable that African trade unions are organisations copied from the European tradition and often following structures imported from Europe, but they also reflect African agency in the workplace.

More generally, it is not the intention here to downplay the significant role played by African trade unions in African history and labour history. Trade unions have certainly been an important part in Africa labour history. The analysis in this paper is based on the assumption that, since the 1980s, with the rise of the neoliberal order, African trade unions' power somehow declined. This article tries to sketch possible historical reasons of such decline. Is this a historical process that cannot be reversed? Is it only a problem of decreasing membership or there is something more substantial which has to do with the very nature of African unions? Answers to these questions cannot be given in full in a short article. However, a general and critical overview of the history of unionism in Africa must constitute a necessary point of departure for any serious debate on trade unionism in the continent. The assumption here is that only through a critical analysis trade unions can be reformed and spared from a social oblivion, which ultimately will negatively affect all workers and African societies.

Colonial socio-economic transformations and trade unionism

In general, especially in settler colonies - such as those in Southern Africa, Algeria, Eritrea, Kenya etc. - racial discrimination has constituted an important factor in the African labour experience, and has also had an impact on the development of unionism (Baldwin, 1966: 42, 82-99; Bower, 1948: 23). European workers, carrying out the same duties, earned much higher wages than their African counterparts. Furthermore, indigenous workers were rarely given any technical training which would have enabled them to maximise

their productivity and increase their earning potential. In Northern Rhodesia, where specialized and semi-specialized white workers dominated the labour market (Arrighi, 1967: 20-21; Kay, 1970: 57-58), African wage earners were not allowed to unionise until the late 1970s. That said, even in those territories that were not under the colonial yolk, it was not until the end of the 1930s that trade unions were legally recognised.

Until the 1940s, with the exception of Northern Rhodesia and South Africa, where the mining industry had led to a significant change in labour relations through the creation of a mass of wage workers, in the rest of Africa, the mining sector contributed little in terms of economic development and social change. Further, for the local populations from whence the workers hailed, the feeble economic advantages created by the mining sector were accompanied by very high social and environmental costs: a lot of arable land was earmarked for mining and lost to agriculture; forests and valuable trees, in both ecological and economic terms, were destroyed; the traditional way of life at a local level was severely disrupted by these changes and this had a direct and negative impact on the established social and legal order.

With the expansion of the capitalist mode of production, in twentieth century Africa, the life of city dwellers became inextricably linked to the fluctuations of the world market economy, which governed their employment and wages through the pricing of mining goods, even though the functioning of the world economy remained alien to them. In order to protect themselves against this alien economic world, wage workers, employees, small scale manufacturers and producers and the professional classes created unions, to enable them better to negotiate labour conditions, wages and the general working environment with their employers. Independent craftsmen and tradesmen also formed corporations which contributed to price stability and the establishment of labour norms and procedures, including for apprenticeships. Such unions and associations also acted as social and recreational clubs for their members, and furnished assistance to members facing financial problems with fiscal or insurance authorities. They would also, on occasion, provide financial assistance to members for important family matters, such as funerals or other ceremonies. In some instances, these associations offered professional training courses and even grants to support further learning.

Among the British colonies, Nigeria was one of the first countries in Africa which saw the development of a more European-style trade union model. In the French colonies, an increase in the number of trade unions occurred in the 1940s. In Western Africa and Equatorial Africa, from 1937 onwards (the year in which French colonial government began to legalise or at least tolerate union and association activities), there was a notable flourishing of labour and trade unions (Fall, 1996: 51). With a large number of registrations recorded in Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, Zambia and Kenya during the 1940s, that period has indeed been characterised as the golden decade of African trade unionism (Ananaba, 1979; Bates, 1971; Yesufu, 1983).

Except for the coastal regions of Western Africa, the Maghreb, Egypt and Kenya, where the process of consolidation of the trade union movement took around thirty years - with official recognition of trade unions coming about in the 1940s - South Africa seemed to offer the most propitious place for the beginning of the union movement in Africa. In South Africa, various conditions were met to allow for the advent of unionism, such as the development of the working classes and the transformation of vast swathes of the rural labour force into wage earners. Moreover, the process of industrialisation had taken hold in South Africa before all other African regions. However, Boer nationalism and the

poison of white supremacist politics rendered African unionism in South Africa all but impossible. The creation of apartheid gave the coup de grace to any hope of establishing trade unions for black workers.

The growth of unions in Africa was to a large extent the result of the development of a capitalist economy. This statement should however be tempered by the fact that in colonial Africa, the capitalist system during colonialism was still rudimentary: wage workers were often casual day-labourers or were subject to a system of dependence from traditional authorities. In colonial Africa, free wage workers - in the Eurocentric sense of the term - were still only a small proportion of the total work force. In the 1950s, such free wage earners are estimated at 4 or 5 million (Banton, 1966). This, together with the numerous restrictive laws enacted by autocratic colonial regimes to curb union organization, delayed the development of a vigorous union movement, which finally took off after the Second World War.

Colonialism and labour spontaneism

As explained by Frederick Cooper in his much cited book, *Decolonisation and African Society*, in the first decades of the twentieth century, as a result of the capitalist transformation of the economy and the increasing phenomenon of urbanisation, wages and the cost of living were two important issues that trade unions focused on with both the colonial government and employers (Cooper, 1996). Examples of unions which pushed for change (through strikes, boycotts and the detention of goods) irrespective of any official sanction include the Railway Workers Union of Sierra Leone and the Nigerian Mechanics Union, both established in 1919, and the Gambia Native Defence Union established a few years later.¹

On the one hand, as brilliantly explained by Mahmood Mamdani, colonialism had upset existing local political systems and produced changes in African power structures (Mamdani, 1996); on the other hand, it had brought about an economic transformation of the African masses: from a system based on subsistence farming to a capitalist market model based on underpaid wage labour, in plantations, mines, road and rail works owned by European investors. The protest movement of the trade unions, similar to other nationalist movements, fought against not only the material interests of European capitalism, but also for a universal anti-racial ideal and against the ethnic and racial divisions created by colonial domination.

In the context of this discussion, it is worth briefly reviewing the overall effects of the First World War on the growth of the trade unionism in Africa. A noticeable example of the effects of the war on the labour organisation in Africa is the transfer and overwhelming need of manpower to feed the war machine, which led to the massive recruitment of men, in Northern and Southern Rhodesia and in Katanga, to fight in the East African Campaign, where the British were confronting Germany (for an analysis on the effects of WWI on labour in Northern Rhodesia, see Gewald, 2015). As a result, in those colonies, wage workers became increasingly scarce. In Southern Rhodesia, white railway workers,

1 The first wave of strikes took place in the mining and transport sectors, in particular the railway sector. The railway workers went on strike for the first time in Sierra Leone in 1919 and then again in 1926. The Ashanti gold mine workers went on strike in 1924 in Obuasi, in the Gold Coast. Another strike took place in the coal mines of Enugu in 1925. That same year the workers from the Dakar-Saint-Louis railway line went on strike. In all of these cases, the strikers were asking for an increase in their wages and improvements in their working conditions.

who up until that time had been hired and fired at the will of their employers, became a more precious commodity and were able to create a union with the consent of the authorities - consent, which until that point, had never been forthcoming (Gann, 1964: 172). The war efforts had the effect to increase labour demand: colonial authorities were unlikely to confront workers and this had a positive effect on the formation of trade unions.

Trade unions were also the result of the initiative of forward-thinking group of urban-based intellectuals. In Madagascar, for example, the trade union movement was born of the initiative of seven medical students who created a clandestine society in 1913, in Antananarivo (Ayache and Richard, 1978: 176; Fremigacci, 2014: 226-227). The group based itself explicitly on the Japanese political model of modernization. Local teachers and officials joined forces with the students. Initially Malagasy nationalism was pitted against Republic French secularism. With the First World War, during a time of violent upheaval, France was ruthless in its suppression of nationalist movements and put paid to the first stirrings of Malagasy protest (Suret-Canale and Adu Boahen, 1993: 181). It was only after the war that trade unions in Madagascar came out of hiding and were freely constituted.

In Egypt and South Africa, unions - in case of South Africa white workers' unions - were very similar to those in the rest of the world. They were characterised both by their mission to represent and protect workers' interests and rights in a given sector in the face of their employers' demands for cheaper labour and less workers' rights, and by their ability to organize strikes and other acts of resistance. The first example in an African context of such a union was the Industrial Workers and Commercial Union, founded in South Africa by Clements Kadalie (Lewis, 2011: 46-47).

In western and equatorial Africa, the French colonial government had banned union activity and only lifted the ban in 1937. With regard to those territories under British colonial rule, trade unions were officially tolerated as from 1932 in Gambia, from 1939 in Sierra Leone, and from 1941 in Nigeria and the Gold Coast (Crowder, 1968: 351-352). Even before public acts on the part of trade unions - such demonstrations and strikes - became officially legal, various unions had begun to use these means to protest against, inter alia, the rising cost of living produced by government policies (either monetary or tariff-based) without taking into account static salary levels.

Between the two world wars, prices of African goods and commodities underwent a general decline. This was in response to the reduction of global demand due to post-1929 economic crisis. This lowering of prices had a negative impact on the demand of African farm and plantation workers, which started to fall. There was an increase in work dismissals in other economic sectors as well and, at the same time, a general decline in wages - except for the gold mining sector. The number of wage earners, which had increased during the war years, had more than halved by the 1930s. To fight against this slashing of wages, workers organized strikes with increasing frequency, despite the lack of formal unions, which had not yet been created among African workers. This spontaneous struggle of the African working class, pre-trade union, saw three waves of action: between 1920 and 1921; between 1929 and 1933; and in 1938 (Deutschland, 1970). It was not only the wage earners but also the farmers who rebelled against the colonial economic stranglehold. An example of this defiance can be found in the 1937-1938 Gold Coast (which was to become Ghana) cocoa crisis when cocoa farmers refused to sell their produce to foreign trading firms (Austin, 1976: 14-16). Another example is the spontaneous "walk out" by day labourers from European-owned mines in Katanga or plantations in the early 1920s in what was

to become Tanzania (Perrings, 1979: 213-235). In the 1920s and 1930s strikes and boycotts were mostly spontaneous and led by improvised leaders, loosely influenced by socialist ideals, and trade unions were not main actors.

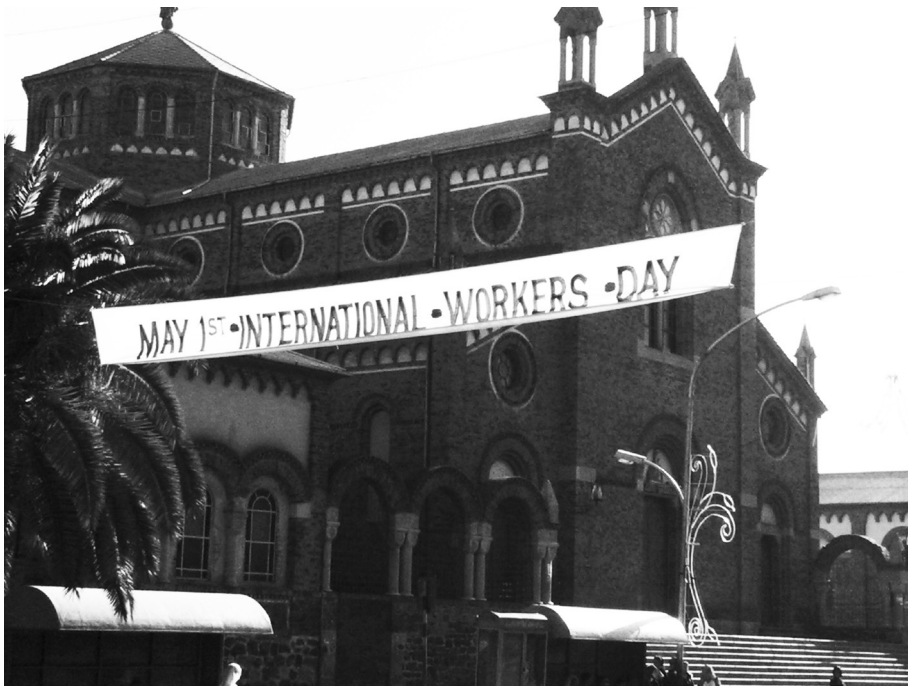


Ilustração 01 - 1st of May. Eritrea 2013. Photo of the author.

Decolonization and trade unionism

The historical momentum of trade unionism is the post-Second World War period, which coincided with the decolonisation process. In this period, colonial governments and metropolises increasingly allowed and legally recognised trade unions. The majority of urban centres developed where there existed vital economic interests to the African economy, such as commercial, manufacturing, administrative or communication interests. The economic crisis of the 1930s and the war years of the 1940s passed and urban hubs thereby could offer labour possibilities to a wide range of workers, be they qualified or illiterate. These urban centres saw a gradual concentration of wage earners moving there, men and women, relying on their only resource: to sell their labour. These men and women, especially those on the lower ranks of the social ladder, might in time have been considered within the future category of proto-proletariats/underclass. However, this definition is in some ways inexact as many were independent workers and craftsmen, i.e. casual workers without a fixed contract or employer.

Despite the general economic revival, which brought a surge in wage-based employment - i.e. the major clients of trade unions - barter economy and the generalised subsistence

and small-scale farming persisted. This explains why, despite progress in industry and in the services sector, from 1946 to 1960, the African working class remained modest in number. In French West Africa (Afrique occidentale française, AOF) and Togo, free wage workers numbered around 250,000 in 1947 and little more than 400,000 in 1957 (excluding European civil employees/officials and domestic servants, for the latter there are no figures available) - in short, the working class made up around 2 % of the population (Suret-Canale and Adu Boahen, 1993: 181). It is important to note that public service employees, excluded from this calculation, did however carry a disproportionate amount of union influence when compared to their number. Indeed, many of the more committed unionists and union strategists came from this administrative "élite", which also included teachers and doctors under the payroll of public authorities. The same reality could be found in many British African colonies.

In British colonial territories, unions were set up following the British Trade Union Congress model, often with the approval and consent of the colonial authorities and retaining a sense of cooperation between workers and employers. That said, nationalist and anti-colonial sentiment was prevalent in the trade union movement in British colonies. In some cases, trade union members took the lead of the anti-colonial movement, as occurred, for example, with the Sekondi-Takoradi port and railway worker unionists in the Gold Coast in the 1940s; anti-imperialist activists allied themselves in the campaign in support of Kwame Nkrumah's nationalist movement. Indeed, the Gold Coast Trade Union Congress (TUC) soon established close ties with Nkrumah's party, the Congress People's Party (CPP). In January 1950, in support of its "positive action" campaign, the TUC declared a general strike (Kraus, 1979: 123). In Nigeria, the close alliance between the Nigerian Trade Union Congress and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) did not last beyond 1951. Indeed, the Nigerian unionist movement was characterised from the start by internal rifts, divisions and rivalry. The more radical elements never managed to wrest control of the unionist movement's power base.

In French colonial territories, the unions were mostly affiliated with the French *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT). This pattern had been established since 1957, i.e. after the proclamation of the famous *Code du travail d'outre-mer* of 1952 applicable to all French African colonies, which recognised, allowed and regulated, once and for all, the formation of trade unions. At the same time, trade unionists in French Africa maintained a strong autonomy guaranteed by the *Comité de coordination des unions de syndicats confédérés*. Many CGT union leaders were also political leaders within the pan-African *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA), including, for example, Sékou Touré from Guinea-Conakry and Bakary Djibo from Niger. The *Fédération des cheminots d'AOF* was independent but gave its members the freedom to join political parties or movements, or to join the CGT. Thus, in 1947, the chairman of the union of Abidjan in Ivory Coast became a member of the CGT, others, such as the Union of Dahomey, joined the *Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC), only to leave it in 1948 in response to pressure being brought to bear by the French leadership for the CFTC to renounce any strike action. The Christian unions affiliated with the CFTC were in a minority and could only be found in places where the influence of Christian missions was notable, such as in Dahomey and along the Guinean coast. In general, however, the schism within the French unionist movement in 1948 had little real impact on the African unionist movement because of the overwhelming membership of the CGT. There was, it should be noted, in addition, a dissident union confederation in the French colonies, called *Force ouvrière* (FO), membership of which was almost exclusively limited to unions made up of those

few European workers present in French West Africa, and employed in the administration, education, transport, trading, health, and plantation sectors.

To the extent that the unionist fight was directed essentially at the colonial administration and at European employers, in an effort to address racial discrimination in terms of wages, status and social rights, this fight fits neatly within the bigger anti-colonial political struggle. By supporting the anti-colonial struggle, the more educated sections of the African population - an elite minority - were also bolstering the unionist campaign, and vice-versa. Strikes which lasted for months, as occurred with the strike of the Senegalese railway workers in 1947-1948, could not have happened without this sizeable external support (Robinson, 2007). The intransigence of the administrative authorities met head-on with a determined union, which had the support of public opinion. In the case in question, important concessions were made to the Union and an undertaking given that no strikers would be sacked. Between 1952 and 1955, another series of strikes took place in French colonial Africa. This time, what was at stake was the adoption of the Code du travail d'outre-mer, which, following its adoption by the National Assembly in Paris, had not yet entered into force in the colonies due to the passive resistance and deliberate bureaucratic delays induced by local, colonial employers (Fonteneau, 2004: 47-48).

The desire of bringing together African workers regardless of their nationality, religion or language coincided with the Pan-African political ideals of a continental unity in opposition to the territorial divisions and the ethnic politics imposed by the European powers. Pan-Africanism was a powerful ideological tool, whose consolidation often required gradual action. For instance, national regional unions were conceived as first attempts towards a wider African union. This is the context in which, in 1956, on the initiative of Sékou Touré, the Confédération générale du travail africain (CGTA) was created; it received a lukewarm reception from various existing unions in Francophone Africa, which perceived it to be too much under the political sway of the RDA. The colonial administration tried to remove the union members from the influence of the CGT and to keep them under its own control. In response, the CGT took the initiative of creating an independent African unit, which would bring together all trade unions willing to join forces - from the CGTA, to the independent railway worker unionists, to the Christian unions - with the sole exception of the FO. The Christian unions, more conservative and closer to the colonial power base, soon established their own umbrella unit, the Confédération africaine des travailleurs croyants (CATC) - the replacement of the term "Christian" with the words "of faith" was decided upon in order to attract Muslim workers to the union. The Pan-African union, which had started life within the CGTA, finally became formally established during the Congress held in Cotonou in January 1957, and was renamed the Union générale des travailleurs d'Afrique noire (UGTAN) under the leadership of Sékou Touré. It has never been clear to what extent the UGTAN foresaw its future position after the process of decolonization - in the event, the pan-African character of the Union gave way to national interests. In terms of the unionist movement, the end result of the nationalist struggle for independence - despite its success in achieving independence for African nation States - was disappointing. The nascent political elites did not generally address workers' claims to have their rights respected, as put forward by their unions. In the end, the working classes and the proletarian and sub-proletarian classes did not obtain any significant benefits following decolonization - a process which saw Portuguese colonial Africa constitutes an exception to the general trend of increasing radical trade unionism. In this part of Africa, as of the 1960s, there was a half-hearted attempt to push forward the process of modernisation of the economy. Investments were made in the

mining sector of Angola and in the transport sector - port and maritime - in both Angola and Mozambique. But the reality of an active proletarian movement fighting for the workers' rights (as a result of this industrialization process) never materialised because of the establishment of a nationalist-style union movement, reserved for qualified and educated workers, in particular of Portuguese or mestizo origins. The racist Native Statute was repealed in 1961, but in Lusophone Africa, Africans continued to be denied the right to unionise except for joining "professional associations for indigenous peoples", which groups were kept under close watch by the colonial authorities (Cruz, 2005).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, during the decolonisation phase, be that Francophone or Anglophone, unionists, especially those linked to the transport industry, and, to a lesser extent those working as civil servants, started to gain real power for their organizations. In Francophone Africa, both during the period of decolonization and upon independence, the idea of "assimilation" proved hard to eliminate. A good portion of free wage workers, especially those more specialised, were indeed assimilated and enjoyed a privileged status in society - there were those who obtained French citizenship and later on migrated to France. This situation interfered with the development of a radical unionist movement. Those workers who were well-integrated within the monetary economy, and enjoyed superior socio-economic status, tended to join unions but not with a view to improving the lot of workers within society at large, but rather, with a view to maximising their own benefits, thereby rendering them closer in status to white, French workers. The French political unionist model - as championed by the *Confédération générale du travail* and the Communist Party of France - reinforced this tendency to compartmentalise claims for social change in accordance with specific groups and categories, thereby creating a self-interested approach to union activism.

In the former British colonies, the trade union reformist tradition led to greater emphasis on negotiations to settle disputes - especially in terms of wage increases - as opposed to resorting to direct confrontation. The Nigerian example is particularly illuminating in this regard. For every strike action, a commission of enquiry would be set up, whose role was often to mediate on the question of wage increases. This led to the criticism from the unionist movement that these types of trade unions were akin to a workers aristocracy. As explained by scholars such as Beckman or Peace, Nigerian industrial workers formed, for all intents and purposes, a proletariat in the universal sense of the term (Peace, 1976; Beckman, 1988). Not far from Lagos could be found around fifty large factories with a relatively high production level, employing thousands of workers in different sectors requiring notable technological skills. The workforce was made up of capable and organized individuals. However, professional mobility was almost non-existent and wages tended to go down rather than up - especially in the context of inflation. Union activism was therefore often linked to control over wage levels. Any mobility that did exist was guided by local interests that had nothing to do with society as a whole and indeed created a sort of bubble within which these workers were removed from the political struggle being waged around them. Little could be discerned in the claims and complaints of these workers that referred to the question of general imperialist exploitation, to concerns of growing inequality and injustice, to increasing examples of oppression in Nigerian society as it underwent a transformation to the capitalist system of production. The ambitions of the Nigerian working classes, which Coquery-Vidrovitch and Maisel defines as "petit bourgeois" (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1988: 291), clearly demonstrate that the main purpose in joining a union was to obtain a good enough salary to allow a worker to become independent and, in time, to become an employer himself. This strategy, aimed at adapting to the existing

economic, political and social system in place rather than acting as a counter-weight to the system, was used by the Nigerian Government, as by many other African governments, to co-opt and keep under its close control union organizations.

Finally, although South Africa was not part of the decolonisation process, it was here that the “proletarianization” phenomenon affected significantly the black and the “coloured” population. In the 1960s, circa 13,000 employers had under their orders around 700,000 salaried workers - this figures exclude the Asian working population, mostly of Indian or South Asian origin (Dutoit, 1981). In the 1950s-1970s, South Africa was the only African country where the farming population and the middle class were dependent on the working class - and not the other way round, as it was in the rest of the continent, at least to the South of the Sahara. Before the wave of strikes that occurred in the port town of Durban in 1973, followed by the series of activist manoeuvres in the 1980s, the government’s violent repression had been often targeting the workers’ movements. Despite the repressive acts of the public authorities, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was launched in December 1985 in Durban. It brought together nearly all of the unions of South Africa and, in a decisive way, brought to bear economic and political pressure on the Apartheid regime, and was instrumental, along of course with the African National Congress and the Communists, in putting an end to the racist system of government in South Africa. Not by chance, already in 1955, the Congress of Peoples included the predecessor of COSATU, i.e. the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and embraced in the Freedom Charter the main demands of South African workers’ movement:

There Shall be Work and Security!

All who work shall be free to form trade unions, to elect their officers and to make wage agreements with their employers;

The state shall recognise the right and duty of all to work, and to draw full unemployment benefits;

Men and women of all races shall receive equal pay for equal work;

There shall be a forty-hour working week, a national minimum wage, paid annual leave, and sick leave for all workers, and maternity leave on full pay for all working mothers;

Miners, domestic workers, farm workers and civil servants shall have the same rights as all others who work;

Child labour, compound labour, the tot system and contract labour shall be abolished. (Mandela, 1990: 52)



Ilustração 02 - 1st of May. Eritrea 2013. Photo of the author.

Post-independence dilemmas: autonomy or co-optation?

Following independence, political leaders in a good number of African States, started to take their distance from the union movements, which, in their eyes, were making demands, which ultimately were hampering the development efforts of economically weak States. In the 1950s and 1960s, the main preoccupation of most African governments was reducing the gap with the “developed” or rich world. The main policy was modernisation through industrialisation and mechanisation of agriculture. In many countries, this required big sacrifices for the nation. For these reasons, many Africa leaders promoted the message that the new African state could not afford social conflict and social division. One-party systems and authoritarianism were often justified to reach the developmental goals and rapid economic growth. Trade unions, like political parties and other civil society’s organisations, were considered as divisive elements of the nation. Therefore, trade unions were often regarded by governments as obstacles for the implementation of their development programmes.

Attempts to side-line unions occurred despite the fact that many amongst the new African leaders began their political activity as trade unionists themselves. African post-independence governments, regardless their civil or military nature and irrespective of their democratic credentials, began to draw development programmes and plans, which did not allow for real and effective unions' participation. Even if trade unions were invited to provide some kind of in-put during the decision making process, this was done superficially with the union leaders mostly relegated to the role of passive transmitters of instructions: from the central political and economic power to the workforce. In most cases, trade unions had no choice but accept this passive role in order to prevent repression and to ensure survival, and in the hope of finding a greater degree of freedom and autonomy in due course. Kester and Sidibé observed that by adopting this "pragmatic approach", many African unions managed to maintain a certain level of independence, which, of course, varied from country to country (Kester and Sidibé, 1997: 12).

Trade unions' autonomy from governments turned out to be limited even in those African countries with socialist or left-leaning governments in power (for a definition of African socialist and conservative states, see Nugent, 2004). This was the case for example in Sékou-Touré's Guinea, Julius Nyerere's Tanzania or Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana. These were also countries based on a one-party system. It was standard practice for these governments to co-opt trade unions into the one-party government structure. In these realities, trade unions continued to exist and function but their role as bargaining organisations was extremely reduced. They were more likely to serve as representative of both the interests of governments as well as those of the workers. In countries where governments proclaimed Soviet-inspired constitutions, such as Somalia, Ethiopia Angola, Mozambique, Benin, etc., trade unions followed a similar path of co-optation and their social and political status declined. In this case, unions were less needed also because these governments claimed to be themselves the expression of the political and social will of the working classes and the peasantry.

Other newly independent countries adopted economic systems more open to capitalism and to private enterprise. They rejected socialism and repressed Marxism. Examples are Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Ivory Coast etc. In these countries, trade unions enjoyed of course a weak level of autonomy. Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) and Botswana were exceptions for in these countries unions enjoyed a greater levels of autonomy. However, the difference in the treatment of unions between socialist or capitalist states is almost inexistent when it comes to the level of autonomy granted to unions. More than the political inclinations of both governments and unions it is important look at the issue of autonomy or co-optation on a case by case.

In theory, following van der Linden's views, the degree of autonomy vis-à-vis governments or employers determines the level of activism of unions. More autonomous unions are supposed to be more prone to confrontation if workers' rights are in jeopardy. Trade unions' leaderships are key in determining the degree of autonomy or dependence from the political power. Is there wise to always ask if a difference exists between the leadership and the rank and file of a trade union. African authoritarian governments, socialist and non-socialist alike, tried to co-opt unions, but in reality who they really co-opted were the leaderships of these organisations. During the crisis of the 1980s, when Africa found out that economic modernisation did not produce the expected economic growth, a sort of division became evident between the union leaderships, on one hand, and the ordinary members and workers, on the other hand. During job cuts and structural adjustments,

workers' protests often erupted from below and without the consent of the leadership.² Strikes out of the leadership control occurred in Nigeria, Benin and Togo. Local, specific or peripheral sections of trade unions were more prone to "rebellious" or spontaneous acts of insubordination. Occasionally governments played a divide and rule game, seeking to weaken those union factions deemed hostile, and encouraging government-friendly factions by allowing them to take part to the government's decision making process (Kester and Sidibé, 1997: 13). The activism of the lower structures can be explain once more with their level of distance or autonomy from the political power. It can also be said that the decision making of trade unions rank and file tends to be more "democratic" and this together with the degree of autonomy could explain also why peripheral and lower ranking sections of unions tend to respond more workers' needs rather than governments' wants. The difficulties faced by African trade unions increased notably in the 1990s, when with a further implementation of structural adjustment programmes, governments marginalised even more trade unions, by not including workers instances in their political agendas in order to please the international financial institutions. One pillar of structural adjustment programmes is privatisation of public economic assets and public utilities. Public enterprises were important employers of wage workers. Workers in the public sector were (and still are) traditionally amongst the most unionised.

Therefore privatizations reduced public employment. This resulted in an increase of workers employed in the private sector and at the same time an increase of unemployment and informal employment/labour. These latter are workers with no contracts and no legal protection. Observers of these phenomena agree that privatisation and informalisation of African economies is the main cause of the decline of unionism. Certainly, structural adjustments triggered a decline in unions' membership.

In the last decade or two, the declining numbers of unionised workers has been the cause of great concern for the two main African trade unions umbrella organisations: the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity; and the International Trade Union Confederation of Africa (ITUC-Africa). The effect of this decline is particularly felt by young workers who find themselves struggling in extremely precarious employment. The reason being that national labour contracts and labour legislations are increasingly dropped or reformed in order to be more "market friendly". This is done by governments wishing to please international financial institutions and donor countries whose interests coincide with those of the employers of the African workforce. Unions are merely actors in this. Can African trade unions stop this trend? This is for the time being difficult to determine.

Despite these problems, some unions still engaged in important labour battles such as for example in Gabon, where unions protested the complete privatizations of two semi-public utilities companies, the Seeg (water and electricity) and the Postal and Telecommunications services, which after 2005 led to the deployment of 25,000 workers, equivalent to 5 % of the active population. Governments abandoned unions and unions became more independent, therefore they became more active and radical. The return to radicalism could heat the struggle between workers and government and workers and employers. New unionist figures are emerging, similar in their radicalism to those of the 1950s. An example is that of Jan Sithole, head of the Federation of Trade Unions of Swaziland, who has been the target of numerous assassination attempts.

² These protests have frequently been aimed at international financial institutions, often responsible for serious economic difficulties and for the dearth of basic goods, which have led to explosive rebellions. Case studies on this theme have been collated by some researchers (Walton and Seddon, 1994).

Marikana is also important to understand the complexity of the autonomy versus co-optation paradigm. In 2012, several miners were killed by the police in South Africa. The confrontation did not take place only between workers, on one hand, and the police and mining companies, on the other hand, but also between unions: the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), which in a few months managed to attract thousands of members, and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), member of COSATU and close to the ANC, the party in power. Salaries and working conditions were at basis of the confrontation between workers and Lonmin, the company which mines platinum in Marikana. The AMCU accused NUM-COSATU of being too close to both the government and Lonmin and of not putting forward a fight on behalf of workers. The AMCU therefore decided to strike alone and not in consultation with both NUM and the South African government. Behind the decision is the simple but heavy assumption that a non-autonomous union cannot properly represent the workers' interests.

As noted by Nicolas van de Walle, the phenomenon whereby unions are co-opted by parties holding political power is one that can be seen throughout the continent; the result is that union activism declines and the union itself loses legitimacy (van de Walle, 2001). The old question, which has been asked since the times of Marx, remains the following: can organizations based on bargaining and compromise be effective in addressing marked socio-economic inequalities and in blocking the mighty power of capitalism?

Today, generally, African government are not interested in union as such but only in "troublemakers". This is when governments start dealing with unions. This is indeed not completely bad news for trade unions. The greater governments do not deal with them, the greater their autonomy. However, power came also with numbers. With increased autonomy comes a decline in membership. The only solution to the problem seems the inclusion of the masses of informal, precarious workers within African trade unions. This is a hot topic. Some unions are, in fact, increasingly looking with a closer eye to the so-called informal sector, the sector outside the formality, law, rights, etc. This a dangerous game for it will mean to recognise that labour can exists in an illegal context, i.e. outside the law and rights. Who will then protect the workers if not the courts or other forms of arbitrating institutions? Difficult to given an answer to this question. In Benin, two unions, the Coordination syndicale autonome du Benin (CSAB) and the Union nationale syndicale des travailleurs du Benin (UNSTB) have increased their membership significantly by reaching out to informal workers such as motorized-taxi drivers, sellers of traditional goods, tailors, dockworkers in Cotonou. For these new members, the unions have created a mutual fund, and they propose micro-credits and they have put in place a system of social security and pensions. But the question now is, can trade unions become the "formalisers" of the informal?

Conclusions

The history of trade unionism in Africa is vast and this essay has tried to highlight some important aspects of this history. Trade unions developed together with the transformation of African society towards a capitalist one. The capitalist mode of production presupposes free wage labour, which indeed gained importance - in terms of numbers - in twentieth century Africa. Therefore the history of the rise of African unionism coincides inevitably with the history of the rise of African capitalism. Because trade unions can only represent free wage workers, trade unions in Africa represented only a minority of

African workers, namely wage workers employed in the formal sector. Secondly, being the gathering together of wage workers into unions to confront and dialogue with their employers is a normal feature of any capitalist society. Bargaining and dialogue is the normal activity of a trade union; strikes and boycotts tend to be the exception to their everyday role as mediators between workers and employers. But Africa had its own historical specificities, due to colonialism and decolonisation, which were political, social and economic phenomena. The presence of a large population not employed as free wage workers also made Africa different from Europe: in Africa, formal wage workers became a sort of “privileged” class.

African trade unions have played an important role in the fight for independence of their respective countries; in this regard, they have traditionally worked closely with political parties espousing the nationalist cause. Their rationale was that independence would have the effect of granting greater freedom to trade union activity and would promote development, thereby improving the working and living conditions of their members. Nationalist and anti-colonial activists were largely intellectuals living in emerging urban centres. These centres were also hubs for the political and economic control of imperialist European powers. Even if some union members worked in rural plantations, the roots of trade unionism are urban; as a movement, it developed alongside youth and student organizations, political and ethnic coalitions, professional associations, literary clubs and religious and charitable groups, etc. To this day, the movement remains an essentially urban and, it is safe to say, an elitist phenomenon.

After the long struggle of decolonisation, at independence, African trade unions found themselves without a superior cause: a cause for a fight that would encompass the mere interests of the member workers, a cause that would embrace the whole society. They submitted to the power of governments and accepted to play a small part in the political life and in society. Inevitably, trade unions’ programmes became more focussed on the protection of the interests of members in whatever sector or workplace they were, if they were to be any. The decline in membership is certainly due to the fact that unions have suffered the neoliberal offensive at the end of the Cold War. However, this is only part of the story. Their decline is also due to the fact that society lost faith in trade unions - and a worker is as well a member of the society in which s/he lives. The Marikana tragedy constitutes only one out of many examples of the detachment between workers and traditional, conventional unions. However, this does not mean that trade unions or other types of workers organisations will not rise again in the future, indeed this is quite probable. After all radical unionism albeit feeble did not die completely. But which other type of workers’ organisation will also depend on which kind of capitalist system will be in the future.

The history of African unionism imparted at least one lesson: trade unions ascended as representatives of wage workers, a minority of workers in Africa; they had a radical project, and their support went beyond their member workers. A part from workers’ rights, early African trade unions, during colonial time and later on in the decolonisation phase, were struggling also for a social change. Their actions were informed by the will to improve working conditions for their fellow members but also living conditions for communities and nations to which these workers belonged. When the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist impetus wilted, after independence, African trade unions became mere bargaining organisations. They weakened and lost their legitimacy in society. In the meantime capitalism thrived in Africa, and with it social inequalities. Labour conditions deteriorated. Is bargaining be enough to confront an ever-powerful capital?

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